

A Question of Murder

by
ANTHONY GILBERT



A QUESTION OF MURDER

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It was lovely Margaret Reeve who told Arthur Crook about the strange happenings in the Poulden household.

Edwin Poulden, druggist in a small English village, lost his wife very suddenly following a bilious attack after a meal of mushrooms. Six months after that dreadful occurrence, Blanche Bannerman, an elderly paying guest in the Poulden home, took sick and, in Poulden's words, was unconscious. But young Patsy, Poulden's ward, overheard him talking to Miss Bannerman about terms he could not meet. That same night, when Margaret stopped in Miss Bannerman's room to see how she was feeling, Patsy's pet cat came tearing out of the room. A little while later Miss Bannerman was found lying dead on the floor.

The inquest established Miss Bannerman's death as the combined effect of a terrible scare from the cat that she detested and a concussion caused by a fall.

But two sudden deaths in the Poulden household in the space of six months seemed too coincidental to the sleuthing genius of Arthur Crook. Things got far beyond what he thought was in store for him when, in his little red sports car, he decided to find out if this might be a question of murder.

a question of murder

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BY ANTHONY GILBERT

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To ANTHONY BOUCHER

To Whose Encouragement I Am Indebted for This Book

Once the sun had disappeared behind the woods that bounded the village, twilight shrouded Mortcomb like a wall. The mist came creeping up out of the woods like a soft tide lapping up the sand, until it surrounded the single row of cottages, the blacksmith's shop that was also the garage, the two large houses (occupied respectively by Lady Hall and an aged retinue, and the retired bachelor, Mr. Montagu), the Dragon Arms at one end of the high street and the druggist's shop at the other. There was a little general store that was also the post office, and that was virtually all. There was no church, no chapel. Religious folk had to traipse into High Benton, which was discouraging to all but the zealots, since no bus service ran on Sundays and the garage was mainly for the benefit of passing cars; not that there were many of these, but Mr. Millett looked after the local radio sets and recharged batteries and mended bicycles and was in fact a jack-of-all-trades. The pharmacy, that bore the name E. Poulden over the doorway, stood by itself on a triangle of grass, with no more than a footpath separating it from the woods. To the girl in the quiet parlor behind the shop on this wintry evening it was like being on an island set in the sea of night. She was dreaming and heard nothing of what was going on around her until footsteps, cautious as those of a prospecting ghost, sounded in the passage. The parlor door opened and a soft voice said, "Margaret!"

She looked up. "Yes, Mr. Poulden; I thought you were out."

"I came back to tell you I'm going for the doctor. The fact is I don't half like the look of Miss Bannerman. Her face is a very strange color and her breathing doesn't seem natural to me. This is a delicate situation for a man in my circumstances—it's bad for a woman of her age when she has no relatives to trouble over her—and I prefer to play safe. So I shall fetch Dr. Grieve. If anyone comes to the shop, be sure to tell him where I've gone."

Officially Edwin Poulden kept hours as ordained by law, but in such an outpost there was no one to trouble very much about its strict observance; when the front door was closed, would-be clients had only to move around the corner and ring the house bell to be taken through the hall and into the shop. In cases of sudden injury, toothache or the like, there was nowhere else where sufferers might apply. At 10 o'clock all the lights in the house were extinguished and no one need trouble to ring, for he'd get no answer. Nothing so modern as a telephone existed on the premises and indeed there were only three in the whole village, one of which was in the post office. But up till 10 o'clock Mr. Poulden was at his neighbor's service. It had been like that, in his father's time, and when Alice Poulden was alive she was always on the alert during her husband's rare absences. Now the young girl, Margaret Reeve, had taken her place.

The druggist came into the range of the firelight with the last words.

The foremost impression he gave was one of length—a long, thin body, a long and even thinner mouth, a long, sharp nose, a high forehead sloping up to a narrow scalp, with hair thinning on the temples, though he was not long past his fortieth birthday. He had long feet in glossy black shoes, and long hands that he was now thrusting into black woolen gloves, for the evening was cold and there was snow in the air. The only feature about him that was neither long nor thin were the eyes, which were like two chocolate balls pushed in under scanty brows, and these were so round they bulged beneath their lids. Yet, had there been any warmth or vitality there, he might have passed for a handsome man; the features were well-constructed and well-set, but normally he was like a fire suffocated with dust, so that its heart cannot be seen.

A falling coal, sending up a tongue of flame, illumined the thin, watchful face.

“I hope you’re not being extravagant with the coal, Margaret.”

He stooped his considerable length and picked up a pair of tongs. His voice was like a pair of scissors, thought the girl, fancifully. Snip, snip—and off comes a bit of your tongue. That was what the matron used to say at the orphanage where Margaret had grown up. So now—snip, snip, snip, and the three lumps of coal that supplied the fire’s heart lay in the fender.

“There is plenty of dust to bank up the grate,” the reproachful voice went on, soft as velvet, muffled as though the velvet were dusty. “It’s easy to see you don’t pay for the coal, my dear. Seven pounds a ton and look at the quality.” He stepped back. “I hope Dr. Grieve will be at home,” he went on. “I didn’t at all care for that young medico’s manner when he came the other day. I’ve been making up prescriptions for Dr. Grieve for years now, and it was he who attended my dear wife in her last illness. A man likes to have some confidence in his doctor, and I have none at all in that Dr. Lamb. Mark that, Margaret. He’s a regular young jackanapes, out to show how clever he is. A doctor’s first duty is to win his patient’s confidence, and so I should like to tell him. Eh, Margaret, did you speak?”

Margaret shook her head. It was in her mind that a doctor’s first duty was to diagnose correctly and then, if possible, cure his patient, and that was what Dr. Grieve had clearly failed to do. He was a rosy, smiling old gentleman with a soothing manner, who’d been practicing his profession for forty years, and remembered little of what he’d learned save the value of a bedside manner and a kind, bluff way of consoling the bereaved. And it must be admitted he’d had plenty of experience at that.

“What is wrong with Miss Bannerman?” Margaret asked. “She seemed well enough when I saw her.”

Mr. Poulden moved back into the shadows of the now gloomy room. “And when was that?”

“I took her an egg beaten up in milk for her tea. She fancied it.”

The frown on Edwin Poulden’s face deepened. “An egg for her tea? One

would suppose they could be picked up in the garden, like stones. Did she say anything, Margaret?"

"Only that she hoped Patsy would be quiet. She is always quiet—too quiet for a child, I sometimes think. And, of course, she said Patsy must keep Tom out of her way. Nothing at all unusual. Really, she speaks of that cat as if it were a fiend."

"I have told Patsy repeatedly it should not come indoors," exclaimed Mr. Poulden more sharply than ever. "I don't approve of animals in the house."

"There was not much sense getting Patsy a kitten if it is to live in the shed," said Margaret Reeve, with more spirit than she had hitherto shown.

(Patsy was not the only occupant of the household who was too quiet for her years. At eighteen one should be a natural rebel.)

"A cat in the house doesn't even earn its keep," continued the complaining voice.

"Tom more than earns his. He is Patsy's only contemporary. Without him, hers would be a very lonely existence."

"Ah!" Mr. Poulden seemed temporarily to have forgotten the sick woman in the interests of this conversation. "You feel that, too? You know, I was always against introducing a young child—and no relation at that—into this household, but my dear wife took the strangest fancies sometimes, and having no little ones of our own—well, as I say, one doesn't like to set up against one's wife—but I feel convinced the child would be better off in some institution where she would have companions of her own age."

"No." Margaret's eyes glowed suddenly, like Tom's in the dark. "No, Mr. Poulden, you are wrong. I grew up in such an institution myself and—well, the best you can say for it is that it is shelter and food, but that is all. It is not enough, not nearly enough. Children need other things even more. They need to feel themselves rooted, to have an identity. Oh, we were never starved or beaten, there was nothing melodramatic about the situation; but I used to think that if I died my bed would be filled within twenty-four hours, and only the orphans on either side of me would notice the difference. We had names, it is true, but for all the use they were to us they might have been numbers."

Mr. Poulden was as startled as if he had, in fact, encountered a wild animal on his hearth rug. Who would have expected it of her, a girl of eighteen with no background to sustain her—hadn't she just admitted as much—and normally no more to be noticed than a piece of the furniture lining the dim parlor walls? A more perceptive man might have seen beauty implicit in the still face and the slender form under the shabby dress, concealed there as a rose's beauty is folded in the bud.

"Dear me," he said. "What a lot of talk about a little girl of seven. Where is she, by the way? In bed?"

"She's sitting by the kitchen fire. She seemed rather tired after her walk.

Perhaps Dr. Grieve could prescribe a tonic. ...”

“A second fire in the kitchen?” Mr. Poulden sounded shocked.

“When the doctor comes he’ll want hot water, I dare say,” retorted Margaret, also a little sharp, “and probably a hot drink for Miss Bannerman. And there’ll be the supper.”

Mr. Poulden grudgingly allowed there would be the supper.

“Surely it’s time for Patsy to be in bed,” he repeated. “And remember what I told you about the candle. It’s most dangerous for a child of that age, as well as being totally unnecessary.”

Margaret firmly replied in her soft voice that she had provided a night light in a safety holder.

“The same objection obtains,” returned Mr. Poulden harshly, in his stilted, old-fashioned way. Everything about him spoke of an earlier generation. But then, the hamlet of Mortcomb, cut off from the world of progress, was itself an anachronism. Less than one hundred inhabitants, including the children, including even the dogs, reflected Margaret, smiling to herself; no electricity in the little houses, some even dependent for water on the pump at the top of the high street. No one wanted to pay the additional tax for electricity, and they boasted of their remoteness, as if they were crabs in their shells or mussels clinging, invisible and tenacious, to their private rocks. If ever there was a place where Time stood still, Mortcomb was surely it. Margaret, reflecting this, had no notion how soon the quiet waters were going to be beaten up into a storm, and the waves come lashing around the little shop where the druggist lived and carried on his business.

“Now remember what I’ve said,” hectored Mr. Poulden. “Neither candle nor night light. She sleeps on the same floor as myself; if she cries out you may be sure I shall hear. Now, don’t make yourself too comfortable. Is there no sewing you could do while you’re waiting for possible customers? I don’t like to see young people idle.”

“I have it here,” agreed Margaret, peacefully. “It’s a new dress for Patsy. I was just going to light the lamp when you came in.”

“It’s over-early for the lamp,” fussed the druggist. “Have you no knitting or crocheting on hand that you could do in the dark? And surely it’s not necessary to make so many frocks for Patsy. She’ll grow up with the idea that she’s a fine young lady, whereas she’ll have to earn her living as soon as she leaves school, like the rest of us. Indeed, I was working in my father’s shop when I was fourteen.”

Margaret laughed outright. “Patsy won’t be fourteen for many years yet and she may not need to work as soon as she leaves school. As for the stuff, I bought it myself—it was very cheap—and it pleases me to make her a dress.”

“I’m sure you didn’t have a new dress nearly so often when you were a child,” commented Mr. Poulden rather vindictively.

"That is why," said Margaret in brief tones. Coolly she changed the subject.

"If you bring Dr. Grieve back, you'll let him see her? This last day or two she's been oddly out of sorts."

"A child of that age shouldn't require a doctor's attention except for a regular illness," observed Mr. Poulden sharply.

"Cousin Alice's sudden death," Margaret pointed out, "was her second great shock. First she must lose her parents in an accident . . ."

"At five years old that doesn't mean so much," remarked Mr. Poulden swiftly.

"It meant a change of environment," insisted the girl.

"Then after Cousin Alice made a second home for her, everything altered again overnight. No wonder she's restless and has nightmares."

"The nightmares are probably due to too much supper. What form do they take?"

"She fancies she's being watched," said Margaret, carefully. "She is coming downstairs and she hears a sound and there are eyes peering through the bannisters. Or she's asleep and someone creeps in. You should be careful, Mr. Poulden. Children as sensitive as Patsy need careful handling."

"I hope you don't encourage her," said Mr. Poulden in severe tones. "I'm sure she's fortunate to have so much attention. In fact, I'm not sure she doesn't get too much. That can be as dangerous as neglect; some people think even more so."

Margaret moved so that the firelight fell on her fresh young face. "Does that mean Miss Bannerman thinks so?"

"I should scarcely allow myself to be dictated to by Miss Bannerman. She is, after all, only a lodger, though of two years' standing. And that reminds me, I am on my way to fetch the doctor. I hope I haven't missed him. And remember, Margaret, Miss Bannerman is not to be disturbed on any account."

"If she should knock . . ." began Margaret dubiously.

"In that case, naturally you'll find out what she wants. But don't let her keep you chattering. I know what ladies are." He stretched his lips in a chill smile, and it was as if a skull grinned through the shadows. He went out softly, pulling the door shut behind him. The little hall was deathly still; he waited an instant as if apprehensive—of what? But no sound disturbed the tomblike silence, until he rattled a stick in the stand and closed the door with a decisive clash.

When she was sure he had gone, Margaret rose and carefully replaced the three pieces of coal; then, going down on her knees on the rug, she patiently blew the fire into a blaze. The thin flames lit up her soft young face, the large gentle eyes, also brown but bearing no resemblance to those of her employer; the pale gold hair, very simply dressed (we want no fal-

lals here, this is a working-class household, said Mr. Poulden), and the mouth with its full lips and rounded chin. A tender face, yet the softness was offset by a resolution in temples and brow, and by an expression that sometimes warned Mr. Poulden, as it had done a few minutes before, that on occasion even he might go too far.

She struck a match and the lamp glowed up like a golden rose. There was a sound outside and the little girl, Patsy, came in with a book clutched under her arm. She gave the same odd impression of having strayed out of a picture book that marked both the other inhabitants of the household.

She closed the door with a conspiratorial air. "Has he gone out, Margaret?"

"He's gone to fetch Dr. Grieve for Miss Bannerman."

Patsy nodded and carefully set the book on the table. "She's going to die, isn't she?"

Margaret looked shocked. "I hope not. What on earth put such a notion in your head? People don't die because a doctor is sent for."

"Aunt Alice did."

There was such a wealth of conviction in the childish voice that the older girl was startled.

"She died because she was ill, not because the doctor came."

"And now," continued Patsy, ruthlessly, "he's coming for Miss Bannerman. Margaret, shall you mind if Miss Bannerman dies? They say in the village you won't."

"Who says?" Margaret's voice was stern. "Patsy, if you're making this up . . . That would be wicked."

"Oh, I'm not." Patsy dismissed the suggestion lightly. "I heard Mrs. Rabbit at the post office say someone's nose would be out of joint when the banns went up. What are banns, Margaret?"

"It means when people are getting married, and no one is getting married; so you see, Patsy, you have got it all wrong."

"And they said," continued Patsy desperately, "she'll have that child out like a wink from its shell. And that means me, doesn't it, Margaret, doesn't it?"

All her surface composure broken down, she flung herself on her companion.

Margaret, her heart heavy with the recollection of Mr. Poulden's recent words, strove to comfort her.

"You don't even know they were talking about us. You shouldn't listen, Patsy. I've told you that before. You hear little bits and pieces and put them together and get the pattern all wrong."

"You have to listen when people don't tell you things. Aunt Alice always told me. And why are they always whispering together? Uncle Edwin and Muss Bannerman, I mean. They were talking just now. In her room."

"Miss Bannerman is asleep, so you are talking nonsense," replied

Margaret. "And why were you on that floor at all?"

"I went up to get the book you bought for me this morning. It was in your room. And they *were* talking. I heard them. Miss Bannerman said something about terms, and Uncle Edwin said he didn't know if he could pay. That's funny, isn't it, Margaret, because if Miss Bannerman is the visitor, wouldn't she be the one to pay? But, of course" (she answered her own question), "I know what she meant. She meant if I didn't go she would. And Uncle Edwin wouldn't like that, would he?"

"Miss Bannerman is in no position to say whether you shall stay or not. This is your home."

"But she hates us both—me and Tom, I mean."

"She can't help it about Tom. I've explained it to you before, Patsy. Some people are like that about cats. They have natural aversion."

"What's a natural aversion?"

"It makes them feel ill, faint, if a cat comes into the room. You should be sorry for her, being old and ill, and try to be kind."

"I am kind," protested the child, her voice shaking. "I do what she says and I don't tell. But she doesn't like me. And she does hate Tom. Uncle Edwin would like to get rid of him, too."

"As long as you keep him away from Miss Bannerman, there won't be any trouble," promised Margaret. "Is he in the kitchen now?"

"He went out when he heard Uncle Edwin come down," replied Patsy. "Margaret, you aren't going away, are you?"

"Of course not. Is that something else you heard? Now settle down with your picture book. I must get on with my sewing and listen for the bell."

"Miss Bannerman's bell?"

"The shop bell, of course. Miss Bannerman has a stick." A new thought struck her. "Patsy, you didn't go into her room when you were upstairs just now?"

"Of course not. I never go into her room, except when she calls me."

"Does she often call you?"

"Not often. And I didn't mean to tell. I don't like going in. She smells, Margaret, really smells, not like Tom, who doesn't smell at all, whatever Uncle Edwin may say. He's the cleanest cat. Aunt Alice always said so."

"He is very clean," Margaret agreed. "Now read your book and I'll get on with my sewing."

Momentarily reassured, Patsy opened the new book and was immediately engrossed. She lay on her stomach before the fire, her fears forgotten. Margaret took up her work but was too restless to proceed with it. She found herself wondering afresh just what the unknown Alice Poulden had been like. A kind woman or she wouldn't have made a home for Patsy when her parents were killed in a train accident and there were no relatives prepared to take the orphan; a gentle woman, unassertive, not effusive—her letters were never much more than a recital of undramatic

facts—yet steadfast, compassionate. Margaret was no more than a connection, the child of a cousin with whom Alice had been intimate in girlhood. Later their paths diverged but they had maintained an occasional correspondence until Mrs. Reeve, who had been left a widow very early in life, died herself, and her child, Margaret, was installed in an orphanage. Alice wrote once or twice a year, sending small presents, a scarf or a box of handkerchiefs. She never invited the girl to Mortcomb (was that Mr. Poulden's doing?) but it was through her good offices that Margaret obtained a position with Miss Sheppard at her home for destitute children, when she left school.

Well, Alice was dead and Miss Bannerman seemed a permanent lodger; indeed, there existed a link between her and the widower whose nature Margaret could not fathom. And neither Mr. Poulden nor the lodger liked children any more than they liked cats. Poor Patsy, with only me to fight for her, thought the girl, throwing aside her work and crossing to the window. To her surprise she saw that snow had begun to fall. The trees, that had appeared sharp as cardboard against the darkening sky, were already hung with lacy shawls. She was disturbed by the situation. When she received Mr. Poulden's letter almost six months ago, she had never hesitated. It was the longest letter she had ever received in her eighteen years and she could recall now its curious flavor, heavy and in some way bitter. It began, a little sanctimoniously it seemed to her, with the story of Alice Poulden's death, her first intimation of the fact.

"It was very sudden and most distressing," Edwin Poulden wrote in the cramped, careful hand so well suited to his personality. "She appeared at first to have no more than a bilious attack, following a dish of mushrooms of which all three of us partook. But she grew worse rapidly and although the doctor was in constant attendance and applied every known remedy, she died within the week. I have been quite distracted with grief. The funeral was on Tuesday last at St. Mark's Church, in High Benton, and the many beautiful flowers and tributes I have received have brought me some comfort."

He then made his proposal. Margaret learned for the first time that, besides the child, Patsy, of whom her cousin had briefly spoken, there was living in the house an elderly lady called Bannerman, a paying guest who didn't wish to leave quarters where, said Mr. Poulden, she had made herself remarkably at home.

"Unfortunately she does not care for children—you see, I am being perfectly frank—and is, moreover, of a somewhat jealous disposition. Your dear cousin was a miracle of tact, but I am much occupied in the shop and can hardly hope to act as a buffer state. I could, I suppose, ask Miss Bannerman to make other arrangements, though this would not solve the problem of the child, but, times being what they are, I should miss her contribution to the household and I doubt whether she would easily find

another equally accommodating. She has, I understand, no relatives and is not precisely prepossessing. But she has shown herself good-hearted and was most assiduous during my dear wife's illness." .

After all this preamble Mr. Poulden got down to the point at issue. Briefly, he requested Margaret, whom he had not met but of whom his wife had always spoken affectionately, to abandon her present position as assistant in Miss Sheppard's home for destitute children and join him at Mortcomb, to act as housekeeper ("under my supervision," he added prudently), and companion and general dogsbody for the child.

"I can offer you board and lodging, pocket money, duties that are certainly not onerous, and a position as one of the household," the letter concluded. "There is an excellent room vacant that, with a little adjustment, can be made into a fine bedroom, and you would have as much free time as you can usefully fill. The air is excellent, far better than the foggy atmosphere of London, and the countryside quite delightful. There is a garden where your cousin grew all manner of vegetables, most helpful to the housekeeper in these days of high prices another shilling on the takes this quarter, one wonders what the world is coming to—in short, I doubt if you can hope to do better for yourself. I enclose a snapshot of Patsy. I don't do as much for Miss Bannerman; not that I haven't a likeness, since she gave one to my dear Alice, but let us be charitable and admit it doesn't do her justice. I shall hope to hear from you in the course of a few days agreeing to my proposal and arranging a date for your arrival here. I feel sure that your present employer will appreciate the situation and make no difficulties about letting you go at short notice."

Miss Sheppard's comments, when Margaret showed her the letter, were scarcely complimentary.

"If candor is the virtue some people suppose, the man should have a halo," she observed. "Well, Margaret, you must please yourself. It doesn't sound to me a cheerful household, and if it weren't for the child I should advise you to refuse outright. On the other hand, he's the only substitute for a relative you appear to have, and you can't afford to disregard the future. If he had an aunt or a sister to take charge he'd hardly be writing to you. He sounds close-fisted but that means he'll have more money to do with. Now, my dear, don't be squeamish. It 'ud be a sin and a shame if you weren't to marry one of these days and have children of your own. Nature never intended you for an old spinster like myself, and if you don't believe me you've but to look in the glass. I'll be sorry to lose you, my dear, but you will, I hope, have more chances of meeting people at this place."

Miss Sheppard glanced through the letter again. "If you ask me," she said shrewdly, "the poor man's in a sort of dilemma he doesn't like to admit to a girl. It wouldn't surprise me to know this Miss Bannerman is setting her cap for him. And she's got money, you can be sure of that. Otherwise why does he agree to keep her on? Unless," she added

flippantly, "he poisoned his wife and she's got a hold over him. But in that case she'd object to *your* coming." Miss Sheppard had a racy tongue and Margaret knew she didn't mean a word of it, but she paled nevertheless. The truth was her mind was already made up. It was the photograph of Patsy that decided her absolutely. In the small face with its wide eyes—of a dark blue she was to discover—with black fringes, the round chin and eager mouth, the head covered with short, dark curls, she saw all the children of the orphanage where she had been reared.

"Yes," she told Miss Sheppard, "I will go. Those who are here have you to look after them, they will be all right, but this one needs me. I feel sure of it. And it's obvious that Mr. Poulden and Miss Bannerman aren't the right people to bring up a little girl."

"There's another point," continued the hard-headed Miss Sheppard. "Have some definite financial arrangement before you go, and if you take my advice you'll get it in writing. In your place I'd try and meet the man before you throw up your present job. Why, the child may be a mental defective, or, more likely, the old woman may. You've no one but myself to take much interest in you, she continued, with no intention of being unkind, and I feel responsible for you in a way. The fact is, I've become fond of you and I want to do what I can to see you have a happy life."

But her good intentions proved barren. Mr. Poulden didn't feel able to leave the shop, and in any case Margaret was resolved. Though the wage offered was small, the conditions sounded pinched, and she couldn't find herself taken by Miss Bannerman, she never wavered. She had been brought up to believe that every life has a purpose not ordained of man, and she saw simply the hand of Providence in this new development. So, with her few belongings in a neat fiber case, and a very pretty tray mat and blue pottery teapot and jug from Miss Sheppard ("for no one knows better than I the comfort a cup of tea can bring") she set out on her destiny.

The rooks were cawing in the Garden Square behind the home as she stepped into the taxi Miss Sheppard insisted on as a parting treat, and she smiled at them affectionately.

"I shall miss them," she said, "but perhaps there will be rooks at Mortcomb." It never occurred to her that they might be warning her of the ill wisdom of her decision, "Go back, go back, don't pass through that door, that way lies the gallows tree." She only said, "How busy they are, and what an example to us all."

And so she set forth on her journey.

But for the child, Margaret would not have remained in her new post for a month. Mr. Poulden repelled her from the start; she found something in his repressed personality that spelled danger. Miss Bannerman she couldn't like; very early she discerned an air of—what? triumph? assurance? about the woman that seemed to her very misplaced. Do what you like, said that sinister air. Whoever goes, I remain. "There is some connection between her and Mr. Poulden that I don't understand," Margaret wrote candidly to Miss Sheppard, her sole confidante. "You would think that if there were friction and all three (for I don't count myself) couldn't remain, the one to go would be Miss Bannerman. Yet she is perfectly convinced of her own security. I wish I were as certain of Patsy's. I think I would take any step to secure her future, and though Mr. Poulden frankly isn't a very handsome bet he is preferable to a children's home, no matter how sympathetically run." Miss Sheppard, meeting her friend Mr. Arthur Crook later that day, both on their respective labors, was surprised to hear him remark in his shrewd, boisterous fashion, "What's troubling you, sugar? Mice in the till?"

"Of course not." You'd never suppose this big burly man, with the thick red hair and brows and eyes like horse chestnuts, was a lawyer and an eminently successful one at that. "Sometimes," she acknowledged frankly, "I think candor can be overdone."

"All depends," said Mr. Crook blithely. "There's some to whom you can and should turn your soul inside out. It ain't what you say that matters but who you tells it to." He tipped his bright brown billycock at her and strode on.

Both were to remember that scrappy exchange a little later.

Tonight Margaret sat brooding until a little crash showed her that the book had fallen from the child's hands. Then she started up.

"You should be in bed, Patsy. I was daydreaming. I'll fetch your nightgown and you can undress by the fire. It's nice and warm here."

"Margaret . . ." the child was infinitely persuasive, "couldn't I sleep with you tonight? I wouldn't disturb you, I promise. I don't like being alone."

"But, Patsy," Margaret sounded dismayed, "you've always slept alone since you came here."

"It was different when Aunt Alice was alive. If she came in the night she always brought the candle with her."

A disagreeable suspicion flashed into Margaret's mind. "So would anyone who came in."

"Uncle Edwin doesn't."

"Now come, Patsy, you know you're talking nonsense. If you called out and he came in . . ."

"He does come in," insisted the child, "and I don't call. And he doesn't bring a candle."

"Are you sure," asked Margaret gently, "it was not a dream?"

"No. He had left the candle on that little table on the landing, and it threw a beam of light into the room. And he came in and stood at the foot of the bed."

"You must have cried out."

"I didn't, Margaret, I didn't. If I did have a bad dream, I wouldn't want Uncle Edwin. I should come up to you."

"Is that why you asked for a candle a week ago?" "Yes. If people are to come into my room when I'm asleep, I want to be able to see them."

"I think," said Margaret in troubled tones, "you *must* have cried out in your sleep and he came to see what you wanted. Then, when you said nothing, he thought you had awakened from your bad dream and didn't want to rouse you. You should have spoken, Patsy."

"No, no. I only wanted him to go away. Now he says I'm not to have a night light, because God is there. Well, I don't want God at the foot of my bed, either, not unless I can see Him. Margaret, let me come in with you. You are so far away, a whole floor, and if I cried out you wouldn't hear. I wouldn't disturb you. . . ."

There was an unchildishness about her urgency that troubled the older girl.

"Of course you wouldn't disturb me, and I shouldn't mind if you did. But I sleep next to Miss Bannerman— there is only the connecting door between us you know —and sometimes she wants attention in the night. And that might wake you."

"I shouldn't mind," pleaded the child. "And I'll be as quiet as a mouse. Oh Margaret, please."

"I promise," said Margaret hastily. "I will go up and get your nightgown and make a place for you in my bed." She left the room and went quickly up the stairs. She knew Edwin wouldn't approve of the new arrangement, and neither would Miss Bannerman. She'd declare the child disturbed her, that she was afraid of the cat. . . . The cat! Margaret stopped dead. "I should die if the cat came in," the woman used to declare extravagantly. If the cat should get into Miss B's room there'd be a nice howdy do.

"I must remind Patsy. Oh dear, what a mercy it would be if something were to remove Miss B."

She remained upstairs for a few minutes. Then a door closed quietly and Margaret came hastening down, the child's nightgown looped over her arm.

After Mr. Poulden had gone Miss Bannerman lay back against her pillows and thought how splendid it was to have power after a lifetime of having none. Until her brother Peter, dying abroad intestate, had so unexpectedly

left her a little income, her experience had been that of so many women of her birth and upbringing, living at home, caring for elderly parents and then picking up any sort of living she could contrive; making a home, if you could call it that, in sundry boarding houses, always aware that nobody would mind if she went away tomorrow. Then, just when she was feeling desperate and there was a glut of women on the market calling themselves forty-five, there had come the news of her brother's death. She hadn't seen him in twenty years and wouldn't have known him if she'd met him in the street, so the only pang she felt was of an added loneliness. Now she had no one left anywhere in the world. She had been suffering from asthma for a long time when the news came, and the doctor she saw told her impatiently she should get out of London. "What's there to keep you there?" he demanded. "A job? No? Then it's sheer selfishness as well as sheer folly to stay. There's a shortage of accommodation for people who must stay in the city. If you don't need to, make place for someone younger who's wearing out shoe leather looking for a room."

Blanche Bannerman knew it was no good trying to make an overworked doctor younger than herself understand that when you have no friends and very little money you're better off in London than anywhere. In London you can go about and talk to strangers without anybody thinking you're nosy or mad, presumably because there are so many people wearing the same shoes. You can get a lot of entertainment for no more than your bus fare, and if you're short of money for the gas you can sit around in the rest rooms of the big stores. Sometimes you made friends that way. And in the summer there were the parks. Quite a number of unexpected friendships had been cemented on the seats near the Albert Memorial. And not only by women. Old soldiers and club men, who twenty or thirty years ago would have spent the last of their days in the bay windows in Pall Mall, now lived in single rooms or residential hotels and spent their all too frequent spare time in museums in winter and the parks in summer. And how they enjoyed themselves, boring one another to death, but playing scrupulously fair, because they knew their turn would come. Still, when the doctor said, "Get out of London," she went meekly to Torquay, but it hadn't proved a success. You can be shabby in London and it doesn't matter, just as you can be a sparrow in London and no one taunts you for not being a bird of paradise. But Torquay was different. Everybody in the smartest hotel she could afford, and that wasn't by any means in the top rank, had played bridge and changed for dinner, if it only meant putting a dressy blouse over a skirt that looked as if it had come out of a museum chest.

And they were cliquey as people in Earls Court had never been. The fact is, of course, London spoils you for every other place in the world. Anyhow, she hadn't fitted in and her attempts to make conversation in those nice shelters the authorities have erected along the sea front met with cold stares and even whispers that she was a bit daffy, as Arthur

Crook would have put it. And the expenses! Everything was an extra. And then one day she went for a coach ride, and they stopped for an hour at a favorite resort for tea and by some astounding chance she came upon Mr. Poulden's advertisement in the Gazette. Comfortable homely accommodation in remote village offered to single lady. Should be country-lover. Sole guest permanency preferred. No children or animals. Terms moderate. It seemed to Miss Bannerman that it might have been put in just for her. She answered at once—she didn't know for a long time afterwards that hers was the only answer the Pouldens received. Mr. Poulden came into High Benton to meet her on the morning bus and took her out to see the house.

Of course the place didn't quite come up to her expectations. Things never do. For one thing there was the child. The advertisement hadn't said anything about a child, but Patsy had turned out to be a quiet little thing and at the beginning there hadn't been any cat. She did point out the advertisement had stipulated no children or animals, but Alice Poulden, who didn't seem to be very well-furnished upstairs as they said in Earls Court, said that only applied to the guest. Her room was on the top floor, and she wasn't sure about stairs, but at least it would be quiet and free from interruption; it was a good size, and the arrangement was that meals should be brought up. She'd never been much of a walker, and anyway there was nowhere to walk to except into the woods, and everyone knew what happened to women who went into woods. They got sucked into bogs or murdered by tramps or had to listen to improper suggestions from maniacs. Besides, she always associated woods with wild pigs. Mr. and Mrs. Poulden had made her laugh. Pepper and Salt she called them; he the tall, thin pepperpot and she the dumpy little saltcellar. If the salt had lost its savor . . . she thought vaguely, only this salt could never have had much. A quiet little woman looking older than her husband (and actually being so by nearly five years, as she learned later), who hadn't an idea in her head beyond looking after the house and accepting responsibility for somebody else's child. Never had any of her own and finding in, Patsy wish-fulfilment, decided Mass Bannerman, who liked to keep up to date in her jargon. The rates were moderate and here, at all events, she wouldn't be subjected to the bitterly unfair competition that had dogged her all her days.

She was an odd-looking woman with a big, flat, sallow face, like the Frog Footman, with hair combed up over her lined brows and gooseberry green eyes. She hadn't been established a month before she saw how the land lay. They weren't taking a guest because Alice wanted company or they didn't like a room going to waste, but because they needed her money. Mortcomb was a hole all right. Sometimes you wondered how the daylight penetrated the shadows that hooded the village. And the Pouldens didn't

seem to know anyone or go anywhere. Alice, in a burst of confidence—drawn on by Miss Bannerman's spoken sympathy and frank admission of her own loneliness—told her that Edwin had wanted to be a doctor, only there hadn't been the money; he had to earn. For years he'd dreamed of getting a scholarship, but when he did his father stepped in and said he couldn't afford to have a son spending money when he should be earning it, so he'd come into the shop and worked there for fifteen years before the old man died and the business became his own.

"It's been hard on Mr. Poulden really," said Alice in her soft voice. "He knows he has the capacity for greater things, but the opportunity was lacking. Old Mr. Poulden wasn't a very good businessman and Edwin has worked very hard to keep things going, but of course conditions don't improve. This National Health," explained Alice, "and improved bus services so that people go into the town to the big pharmacies where everything's cut price and they stock home permanents and things like that. You might think they wouldn't bother in the back of beyond but they do. Nobody goes out to domestic service from Mortcomb any more. They all go into High Benton to the factory." So what with one thing and another, though Edwin didn't care how long he worked, they had never been able to put much by.

Blanche Bannerman, looking at the sleepy little shop in a cul-de-sac, wasn't surprised. What surprised her was that such a couple had contrived to keep their heads above water for so long. Not that Mr. Poulden wasn't a very superior person. For one thing, he saw she was something exceptional. Now and again when Alice was engaged with the child, she'd inveigled him into conversation; and there had been a fortnight when Alice took the little girl away, rather anxious in case Miss Bannerman felt she was being neglected and explaining with great care that Mrs. Baird from the village understood the situation perfectly, and would see to it that Miss Bannerman was well looked after. Blanche had enjoyed that fortnight. She had come down of an evening and talked to Edwin, and though it was rather like talking to a tree, a wintry tree with no expanding hands of leaves, she had persevered and learned quite a lot about the situation. Edwin, like Blanche, had no one to talk to. Neither of them was religious, so they couldn't even confide in God, as a lot of the lonely people Blanche had known in London had done. He'd lost a lot of his ambition, wasn't as young as he had been—forty-one actually but looking more—and didn't ask more of life than that he should be able to keep the business going. Fortunately it managed to keep going. The villagers still remembered old Mr. Poulden and some of them didn't feel any more at home with the bright, cheerful chain stores than Miss Bannerman had done at Torquay. And the elastic hours were a help. But if it hadn't been for the blind pig, which was what paying guests had been called in Miss Bannerman's youth, it was doubtful if they could have survived.

It was a shock when Tom was introduced into the household, a little black kitten like a bit of velvet, with sly topaz eyes. Miss Bannerman couldn't bear cats. "If ever it comes into my room," she told Alice, "I shall have one of my attacks and probably pass out for good." Alice promised faithfully it never would. Patsy had a little dressing room on the floor below and pussy never came upstairs at all. The little girl spent most of her time in the kitchen, because Mr. Poulden didn't care for children any more than Blanche cared for cats. The child went to bed before the shop closed and Mrs. Poulden settled down in the parlor for the evening.

She'd been there two years when Alice Poulden died. It all seemed to happen overnight, as you might say. Alice and the child had gone out gathering mushrooms. Alice looked after the bit of kitchen garden and grew most of the vegetables, as well as looking after the house and the child and the lodger and sometimes taking a turn in the shop when Mr. Poulden was busy mixing prescriptions or visiting locally. She never rested at all. Miss Bannerman heard her say she hadn't read a book in five years. When the mushrooms were gathered, Miss Bannerman, who was sitting in the garden, came in and offered to help peel them. Patsy went to look for Tom and the two women sat chatting amicably at the kitchen table. Alice cooked the mushrooms and they were arranged on three pieces of toast. (The original arrangement that Miss Bannerman should have her meals alone in her room had broken down long ago. Now she breakfasted alone, but at other times ate with the family.) She remembered that evening very well because Patsy suddenly complained of toothache. Mr. Poulden went into the shop to get some oil of laudanum and Alice went up to the child's room. Miss Bannerman went to set the table and Edwin and she talked for two or three minutes before Alice reappeared saying Patsy had settled down.

During the late hours of the evening, after Miss Bannerman had retired, she heard Mr. Poulden moving about, and softly opened her door. Sounds of distress came from the floor below. She waited a little; then, tying her dressing gown firmly about her, called down to know if anything was amiss. Mr. Poulden, looking more distracted than usual, his fine, thin hair rather wild, his whole appearance beaky and distraught, said that Mrs. Poulden had one of her bilious attacks.

"The mushrooms," he explained. "I thought it unwise at the time. She is devoted to them, quite devoted, but they don't agree with her. It's most kind of you to inquire, Miss Bannerman, but there is nothing you can do. I am just going down to get her a mixture that she's had before when these attacks were upon her. I'm afraid we're in for a disturbed night, but I hope that won't prevent you sleeping."

Hope, as the author of *The Dolly Dialogues* has observed, is not yet taxed. Miss Bannerman returned to bed but not to sleep. She listened, ears astrain. She could hear Mr. Poulden moving about for a long time. At last

the square of gold light in the window beneath hers went out. Mrs. Poulden presumably was asleep. Early the next morning Edwin tapped on her door and handed in her breakfast tray. He was worried about Alice, he said. She'd had a bad night and hadn't managed to get rid of the poison.

"Poison?" repeated Miss Bannerman.

"That's what mushrooms are to her," Mr. Poulden returned, earnestly. "Her digestion is her weak point. I want to get Dr. Grieve now, but Mrs. Poulden won't hear of it, swears she'll be all right by tonight; but if she's not I shall certainly fetch him."

She was no better, rather worse in fact, next morning, so Mr. Poulden went out, asking Miss Bannerman if she'd be kind enough to keep an eye oh the shop. Patsy went to school and the cat was out somewhere, so the house seemed unnaturally quiet, almost as though someone in it had died already. Mr. Poulden was back soon but it was 12 o'clock before Dr. Grieve appeared. By that time Alice seemed a great deal worse and nothing her husband could do for her improved the situation. Dr. Grieve found Miss Bannerman sitting with her, since Edwin, naturally, had to look after the customers. Dr. Grieve was quite cheerful. "Hum hum," he said, "mushrooms, yes, highly indigestible." He left a prescription and went off, assuring them there was nothing to worry about. But within twenty-four hours Alice was dead. She said her husband's name over and over during that last night and he never left her. Next morning he went out to get Mrs. Baird, their unfailing standby, and she came at once. She scolded when she heard about the mushrooms. "You'd think she'd have had more sense," she observed in her outspoken way. "It'd not surprise me to learn she ate a toadstool by mistake."

Miss Bannerman, who had gone down to the kitchen uninvited, threw up her head.

"I never thought—is it easy to confuse them?"

"Plenty of folks have died of the mistake," said Mrs. Baird grimly. "Though I wouldn't have thought Mrs. Poulden would fall into that pit. Mr. Poulden's rarely fond of mushrooms and of course it does save the grocer's bill when you can wander into the fields and bring half your dinner home."

Miss Bannerman looked fearfully distressed. "I don't believe I should know the difference. And I helped her to peel them."

"If it was a toadstool, it wouldn't peel," Mrs. Baird assured her. Miss Bannerman looked dubious. It sounded an open-and-shut argument, but was it, in fact, the truth? "And anyway," the woman went on, "Mrs. Poulden would look through them before she put them on. Town folk haven't no gumption where that sort of thing's concerned."

Miss Bannerman reddened. She thought Mrs. Baird a rude old woman, but she couldn't say anything. The fact was she could never quite rid herself of the conviction that, because she came from London, she was

somehow superior to these country bodies.

Mr. Poulden waited two or three days before asking Miss Bannerman if she'd thought of plans for the future.

"Naturally things are changed now," he said, "but I don't suppose you'll have much difficulty finding comfortable accommodation elsewhere."

Then she sprung her mine. "Oh, I hadn't thought of moving," she said cosily. "I've come to think of this place as my home. Indeed, I thought I'd only go out feet first, as they say, and that won't be for a very long time, I'm sure."

She was convinced his color had changed, become rather muddy-looking instead of its normal sallow hue.

"It won't be the same without Alice," he said. "There are bound to be changes."

She purposefully misunderstood him. "You mean about the little girl? Well, yes, you'd have to make some fresh arrangement for her, but then I never did think it was a good thing for a child to be in a middle-aged household. In some sort of home she'd have friends of her own age. . . ."

Then it came out that Mr. Poulden had no intention of parting with Patsy. Alice had left her small fortune to the little girl, and so long as she stayed in Mortcomb Mr. Poulden would have the handling of the money.

Did you know about that? Miss Bannerman wondered. "Did it come as a shock?" Nothing to the shock he was going to get now, though.

"My wife," he was saying, "was a very remarkable woman. . . ."

Yes, she'd been that, Miss Bannerman allowed; so quiet, melting into the furniture you might say, never insisting on anything, mousey in fact. And yet, how much had she known of what was going on? When she sat by the sick woman's bedside, convinced that she was going to die, Blanche Bannerman had found herself wondering how much the doomed woman knew. But she never said a word.

"You're a deep one," Blanche had reflected. "You don't believe dear Edwin's tales about having to take orders to the Castle in person. You can add two and two as well as anyone." It was Beryl Fowler, of course, a little shrimp of a creature with her black hair and her burning eyes and the passion she couldn't suppress. Three or four times a week she'd come into the shop and if Edwin himself weren't behind the counter, you could almost hear her face fall. Miss Bannerman chuckled. Not that there wasn't something macabre about it really, a girl like that—twenty-five she gave out she was, but you could be sure she'd never see thirty again—devoured by passion for another woman's husband. Miss Bannerman, who'd never been rent by worse pangs than jealousy, and had secretly shrunk from the thought of "all that" in connection with marriage, couldn't pretend to understand. But the naked hunger in Beryl's face, the humility with which she'd angle for a single word from the object of her devotion—oh, there was no mistaking that. Mr. Poulden was a harder nut to crack. Naturally,

Blanche knew from the start he didn't care a straw about Alice. But did he return Beryl's passion? Why, she'd never heard him speak her name, and if it ever came up in conversation he never gave any sign. But now and again Miss Bannerman had seen them when they hadn't known, and had been shocked, alarmed even, by the smoldering fire they generated.

Here was the curtain down on the first act: Alice safely in her grave, but the ghost not laid, oh never to be laid, whatever the guilty lovers might believe. She, Blanche, was going to be there to stop the final wickedness. She was dug in for life, and it only remained for her to make the position clear to Mr. Poulden. She hadn't perhaps been the brightest pupil in the arithmetic class, but she could add two and two and she'd been perfectly prepared for Edwin's objections and ready to counter them.

"Tread softly because you tread on my dreams," pleaded the Irish poet, W. B. Yeats. Miss Bannerman had large feet and she planted them squarely wherever she wanted them to go. She didn't care if she kicked Beryl Fowler's dreams to tatters. Beryl could think what she liked, sin in secret all she could, but to marry Edwin Poulden and oust Miss Bannerman was beyond her powers. For Blanche never had any doubt at all, didn't believe a word of this hocus-pocus about toadstools. To her it was obvious there hadn't been a toadstool on Alice's plate; it would be too simple. Why Alice, and not Edwin or Blanche? There were advantages about being a druggist and having a nodding old fool like Grieve for a doctor. All *she*, Blanche, had to do to safeguard her own interests and keep the reins of power in her hands was let Edwin see she had her suspicions. So she said, "In that case, you'll be getting someone to look after the child. I was thinking Mrs. Baird might come in, but you'll really need someone full time, won't you?" Then she added casually, "Miss Fowler was up this afternoon, wondering if there was anything she could do. But I told her I thought we needn't trouble her. I m sure we shall rub along very well together. I've just written" to my lawyers, telling them about poor Alice's ' death and saying I don't expect to be looking for fresh quarters. . . ."

Then she had offered to help him write to the people who'd sent flowers.

"Whose was that wreath of carnations?" she had inquired artlessly, and of course they both knew it was Beryl's.

After that she never heard another word about her going. Instead Mr. Poulden produced Margaret Reeve like a rabbit from a conjuror's hat, explaining that she'd be cheap, being so young, and appeared to be docile, according to her present employer.

If she's so good I wonder this Miss Sheppard's so ready to part with her," observed Miss Bannerman, her eyes as round and hard as shoe buttons, though not the same color.

"She isn't, but she feels it would be an opportunity for her to—forge a human link is her expression. The girl's an orphan. . . ."

“There’s no harm making it clear that this Margaret Reeve won’t be coming here to forge links but to make herself useful,” suggested Blanche, smoothly. “Still, you needn’t worry about her. I’ll look after all that. You’ve got your business to attend to, haven’t you? Things have been a bit quiet lately, but then with sickness in the house . . .” She left that sentence unfinished. “I daresay I’ve more experience with young women than you.”

“These dear old goosey-ganders, they do ask for it,” Crook had said more than once. “They’re like murderers, have one-track minds. See one step ahead like the chap in the poem, and though it may have been enough for him it ain’t for them. It never seems to occur to them that you can’t hang twice and chaps who’re ripe for the little covered shed can afford more risks than the innocent, like you and me.”

He said that to Miss Sheppard, among others, after the second death had occurred in the Poulden household. And even then he had no notion that this was only the start of a positive blaze of sinister fireworks.

Miss Bannerman’s staying on was the subject of a good deal of talk in the village. Naturally. Villagers work hard and have few distractions. It surprised some of them to find the old girl wasn’t looking for fresh lodgings, but they explained it easily enough. She was a miser—she had a box of gold under the bed—she’d left everything to Mr. Poulden in her will—or else she’d been financing him to keep his miserable shop open. Several optimistic ones even suggested the couple might make a match of it when the year’s mourning was over.

“No need for a picture theatre in Mortcomb,” said the elders when they heard that. “The ideal!”

Only Miss Sheppard had hit on the real reason but it didn’t make much difference, because at that stage she had no notion she knew, or of course she wouldn’t have let Margaret come, Patsy or no Patsy.

Miss Bannerman, heedless of Miss Sheppard’s existence, turned luxuriously on her pillow. She might knock and ask the girl for a cup of tea or something. No harm reminding people you were alive, whoever might have gone to a premature grave in the churchyard. But when she looked around she realized that the stick which should be leaning against the chair had been moved. She couldn’t reach it without getting out of bed. Oh well, no matter. Mr. Poulden would be back soon with Dr. Grieve. He was a silly old sausage, but that didn’t matter. The important thing was to establish herself in the eyes of the village as a person of significance for whom other people went out into the snow to fetch a doctor. Not that she was really ill, mark you, but she certainly hadn’t been feeling quite herself this past week—a chill most likely, but it didn’t do to neglect yourself. Having a doctor come in so often would be a safeguard, so Miss Bannerman thought. She looked through the uncurtained window and saw a dark ghost shrinking along on the farther side of the road. She’d know

that ghost anywhere. It was Beryl Fowler. Miss Bannerman chuckled. Funny, really, to think of her haunting the place even in bad weather, in the hope of catching a glimpse of her beloved.

If she could blow poison through the window she wouldn't hesitate. "Well, she can go on dreaming of a wedding ring, but she'll never get it from him. I'm in the pink," reflected Miss Bannerman, forgetting the numbers of times she'd impressed on Dr. Grieve, who was fool enough to believe her, that she was really in a pretty delicate state, "and I hold the ace." The fun about holding the ace was that no one could ever be quite sure when you were going to play it. Still, she wouldn't keep them in suspense much longer. . . .

It was a pity she'd never troubled to learn the rules of bridge during her years in hotels and boarding houses. If she had, she'd have remembered that the smallest trump can take even the ace.

Presently Beryl lost heart and slunk away. Miss Bannerman nodded an invisible good-bye. When she'd played her ace and collected her trick, Edwin would have to make it clear to the woman that this sort of thing was simply a waste of shoe leather. Come to that, there were quite a lot of things Edwin would have to understand, and there was no sense his pretending he couldn't meet her terms. Patsy, for instance. There'd be no room for Patsy or her cat in the new regime, and if Edwin was sensible he needn't be the loser. And Margaret—the anticipatory smile of a fiend full-fed vanished for a moment—she could go back to her precious Miss Sheppard. A snooper, a troublemaker, that was Margaret Reeve, sitting cosily downstairs, no doubt, and not giving a thought to the old woman in whose hands her destiny lay—her immediate destiny, that is. She should have been up before now to light the gas and put some coal on the fire which was no more than a nest of gray ash. It was a nuisance about the stick, but you could make a lot of din with the heel of a shoe. She put out her hand and struck a match. There was always a candle standing at the bedside, in case she wanted a light in the night. She watched the candle flame die down and then spring into a steady beam of gold. Leaning out of bed she bent for the shoe and her heart almost stopped beating with fear and horror. For the reflection in the tilted mirror showed her that she was no longer alone in the room. How long her enemy had been watching her from the dark she had no idea. The door of her room didn't fit well because of a defective latch. Unless it were slammed hard, the door was liable to swing open; or, of course, it could be pushed by an intruder. Lying there, rapt in reverie, in the half-dark, she had neither seen nor heard anything. Ah, but this one had come in so softly, was now watching her with intent green eyes, a creature without conscience and without compassion as she well knew.

"What are you doing here?" she whispered. "Don't stare so. Go away, go away at once."

Oh, why had someone moved the reassuring stick and left her helpless? She felt her heavy body tremble, her eyes bulged, her voice was choked, as if her throat were a tangle of thorns. She put up her hands in a foolish, aimless gesture.

"I never did you any harm," she whispered. "Of course I never meant to hurt you."

But where was the sense in appealing to one who, she well knew, would never heed a cry for pity? There was no answer to her plea, no movement, simply that intent green stare, the rigid attitude of one poised to spring. She opened her mouth and forced out a thin scream. But who was there to hear? Or, hearing, to bother about her? This, she understood, was how it had been meant to end. She looked wildly about her. The door was impossible since the newcomer barred her way, but there was the window. ... If she could open that . . . She struggled and half-fell from the bed, staggered across the intervening space and tugged at the sash. Her heart seemed to spring and rattle in her breast, but she got the window up. It was no use, though. The distance to the ground was too great. Leaning against the dressing table she seized every article within reach and hurled it indiscriminately. Surely someone would hear, would come! She caught a glimpse of a maniac in a lavender-colored bed-jacket gibbering at her and fresh horror engulfed her. While she had her back to the door a second intruder had made an entrance. It was several seconds before she realized she was staring at her own reflection. As though this were the final shock she gave a deep, guttural breath and her knees seemed to collapse under her. She sank heavily to the floor so that the chairs and ornaments rattled, but still no one came in.

The wind from the open casement soon extinguished the candle; the last glowing coal fell into gray ash as softly as a sigh. But Miss Bannerman neither saw nor heard. So far as she was concerned the darkness had come down for good.

After a while, when it became clear that no more missiles would be hurled and that therefore the danger was past, the little cat, who in fact bore the old woman no ill will, came daintily round the corner of the bed into the fleeting light cast by the snow. On the polished boards lay a round pale object, one of the buttons from the bed-jacket the inanimate old woman was wearing. Delighted with this new toy, the little creature began to pat it up and down with a delicate cream-tipped paw, purring with pleasure. Once the graceful black tail stroked against the dark-colored face of the woman on the floor, but she gave no sign, and the cat played happily on.

three

When Margaret came down from upstairs, she found Patsy standing by the open garden door.

"What's the matter? You shouldn't be standing there in that wind. You'll catch your death."

"I was looking for Tom," explained the child. "Oh, Margaret, do you think something's happened to him? He never stays out so late."

"I dare say he finds the snow amusing. He's never seen it before."

"But he'll get frozen. Margaret, he might have gone up a tree and now he can't get down."

"You'd hear him calling. You know what a noise he makes. Mr. Poulden says he screeches."

"He doesn't." Patsy was indignant. "That's just his voice. Different people talk differently, that's all. And anyway he might be afraid and not be able to make a sound, like me when Uncle Edwin came in the other night."

Margaret sighed. If Patsy got worked up now she wouldn't sleep. "Very well," she said, taking the child's hand, "we'll go quickly around the garden and call him." They picked their way through the thin carpet of snow, but there was neither sight nor sound of the missing cat.

"I dare say he's gone to visit the little lady cat over the way," Margaret suggested in soothing tones. "You know she's always coming over here, so perhaps this time it seemed better for him to go to her house."

Patsy looked unconvinced. "Margaret, you don't think Uncle Edwin took him away in his pocket?"

"Of course not. Why, you said yourself that Tom only ran out when Mr. Poulden came down."

"But he came back Uncle Edwin, I mean. I saw him."

"Then I dare say he had forgotten his umbrella. You know he never touches Tom. He's afraid to, ever since the day that Tom scratched him."

"Because he tried to swing him up by the tail. Anyone would scratch if you caught him by the tail."

"Anyway, he hisses whenever Mr. Poulden goes near him, so you can be sure he'll give him a wide berth. No, no, he's visiting, and he'll be back when he's ready. And as soon as he does I'll smuggle him up to you. Now come and get undressed before the kitchen fire. I think you'd better stay in your own room till the doctor's gone." A new thought struck her. "Mr. Poulden has been gone a long time," she murmured. "I suppose Dr. Grieve wasn't in."

She persuaded the reluctant child to go back to the house, leaving the garden door ajar, despite the cold wind that swept through the hallways. Patsy remained uneasy.

"You don't think he might have got caught in a trap?"

"No one sets traps around here."

She got Patsy into bed, brought her a cup of milk and watched her pour a little into the saucer, where Tom would look for it on his return. She sat with her, reading, until the child seemed drowsy, then stole up the stairs to Miss Bannerman's door. There was no sound from within but the door itself stood a few inches ajar. She pushed it a little wider and something streaked between her legs, almost upsetting her balance, and fled down the stairs. She hurried after it.

"Tom!" she called. "Tom!" But the little cat flew down the stairs and into the garden. Margaret hesitated an instant. Which to do first? Get the cat and put it into Patsy's room, or go in to Miss Bannerman? She decided on the former. From the dark room where now no light glowed at all came a silence as deep as death.

As she reached the hall, however, the house bell began to ring. "I am coming," she whispered, turning toward the garden door, but whoever was outside was short of patience, and no wonder on such a cold night, and the bell pealed for the second time.

"Whoever it is will wake Patsy," she thought, so, pushing the garden door closed, she hurried into the hall.

The customer was none other than Mr. Montagu, the rather eccentric bachelor about whom odd rumors circulated. He was a distinguished-looking man in late middle age, dressed with some ostentation in a fashion a little behind the times. But then any contemporary mode in Mortcomb would have looked stranger still.

"I thought Mr. Poulden must be out," he said as the girl appeared.

"He has gone for Dr. Grieve. Miss Bannerman's not been so well the last few days and Mr. Poulden feels his responsibility. I suppose the doctor is out and Mr. Poulden is waiting."

"Then he'll wait a mighty long time," retorted Mr. Montagu. "Dr. Grieve had a stroke this afternoon and they're saying it's not likely his carriage will be seen on these roads again except on its way to the cemetery."

"Oh, that will be sad news for many people round about," said the girl innocently, and Mr. Montagu found himself wondering just how that fox, Poulden, had persuaded her to come to his gloomy establishment to look after a sick woman and a child. It couldn't be a very entertaining existence. He doubted if any man younger than himself ever swam into her purview.

He said dryly that it would make sad news for the undertakers. Dr. Grieve was the best friend they had in these parts, he added, for he believed in speaking his mind.

He had brought a prescription that required a proportion of a drug only to be obtained by signing the poison book.

"I thought Mr. Poulden would be here," he said, but Margaret replied that she sometimes helped with the dispensing and knew where to find the

key to the poison cupboard. He waited while she weighed and measured and soon brought him a little packet neatly sealed, and the book to sign.

"This must be a dull place for you, my dear," he suggested unexpectedly, pushing the book back across the counter. "What do you do with yourself in the evenings? A'n't you never bored?"

"There isn't time," said Margaret, looking surprised. "I have the dinner to get and clear away, and there's sewing and darning ..."

"And making conversation for Mr. Poulden?"

"Oh, I don't see much of him in the evening," said Margaret. "When she's in good health Miss Bannerman sits with him. Well, he misses Cousin Alice a good deal, and I shouldn't be much of a companion for him. I don't know enough to make interesting conversation. And then he has his newspaper clippings. He collects clippings about crime."

"That's an odd hobby," murmured Mr. Montagu. "Especially in a druggist."

"It's no stranger than reading detective stories," Margaret demurred. "He believes the real cases are more interesting than fiction. He says human nature is his study and he cuts out anything at all mysterious—sudden death or accidents that seem—well, not quite straightforward. . . ."

"A veritable Dr. Watson." Privately he thought the fellow looked like a coffin stood on end, tall and black. "Well, I mustn't keep you," he said presently. "I hope the old lady's better in the morning." Though why he should hope anything of the sort he couldn't have told you, for he didn't know her and wouldn't have liked her if he had.

When Mr. Montagu had gone Margaret put out the light in the shop, and coming back past the garden door heard an indignant mewing on the farther side. When she turned the handle Tom sprang in, his short black coat glittering with morsels of frozen snow. "Be careful," Margaret exclaimed. "You'll make a mess on the floor. . . ." She seized him and rolled him in a piece of toweling from the kitchen. "Where on earth have you been to get yourself in such a state in such a short time?" she demanded. The cat rubbed his face ecstatically on the dry towel.

"You'd better come up before Mr. Poulden comes back," she told him severely.

Slipping up the stairs she opened the door of Patsy's room and pushed the little cat within. Patsy started up. "Who's that? Oh, my darling," as Tom hurled himself onto the bed.

"And now I suppose she will let him get under the blankets and if Mr. Poulden finds out he'll say it's unhealthy and I dare say he's right," Margaret reflected. There was still no sound from the floor above, and as she closed the door of the child's room she heard the sound of a car drawing up outside. An instant later there was the scrape of a key in the lock and Mr. Poulden came in, shaking the snow off his hard black hat onto the outer step, and frowning at young Dr. Lamb, who observed no

such niceties and was actually making a pond where he stood on the linoleum he hadn't paid for and was prepared to ruin without a thought. They went straight upstairs, two sets of footsteps, Mr. Poulden's suggesting that he was stealing up on an enemy whom he intended to take unawares, the second firm and uncompromising.

"Of course," Mr. Poulden was saying, "she may be asleep, in which case it would presumably be unwise to rouse her; but in my position I don't care to take risks."

"The risks are my department now," was the doctor's grim retort.

The sick woman's room was in complete darkness and a furious wind came rushing at them, blowing the curtains askew as the door was opened. An air of corruption hung about the place. Margaret, who had followed them up the stairs, drew in her breath sharply.

"What's this?" exclaimed Dr. Lamb. "A window open in such weather? I left particular instructions she must be kept warm."

Mr. Poulden came thrusting past him. "Who has been in here?" he exclaimed. "The room was perfectly warm when I left it."

"And is your gas supply cut off?" the doctor continued in the same ungracious manner. "For Heaven's sake, man . . . the place might be a tomb."

Mr. Poulden struck a match and gingerly applied it to either of the two small jets beside the fireplace. The doctor put out his arm and turned them up in a way that made Mr. Poulden gasp.

"You will smoke the ceiling," he began.

"I'm not concerned with your ceiling. I'm only interested in my patient. If you supplied modern gas globes, you could ignore the smoke."

Now that the room was illuminated it presented a horrifying scene. Margaret plunged past to close the window that stood wide open from the bottom. As she did so a lump of snow fell with a thud, reminiscent of earth being tossed onto a coffin.

The doctor was on his knees beside the recumbent form of a stout woman in a grayish nightgown, that lay sprawled on the floor. No attempt had been made to give the room a comfortable or homelike air. Although Miss Bannerman had occupied it for more than two years she had left no trace of her personality there. There were no photographs, no cherished ornaments. The room looked as though a tornado had swept through it. Various objects lay about the floor, a hairbrush, a cake of soap, a coat hanger, a number of shoes. The clothes from the bed had dragged to the mat beside it, the pillows were tumbled. Miss Bannerman herself looked as though she had heaved her bulk from the sheets and fallen headlong and that, in fact, was precisely what Dr. Lamb believed had happened. A broken cup and saucer lay on the floor, and a heavy walking stick with a crook handle leaned against the dressing table.

The doctor stood up after a minute. His face was dark with anger.

"What's been going on here?"

"That's what I should like to know, too," agreed Mr. Poulden, as pale as the younger man was dark. When I left Miss Bannerman she was in bed, and virtually past speech. In fact . . ." he paused.

"Well?" snapped Dr. Lamb.

"To tell you the truth," acknowledged Mr. Poulden, in troubled tones, "I thought she might be sinking. That's why I was anxious to have a doctor for her before it was too late."

"You mean, you thought she was dying? Come, man, let's have the facts. The coroner will certainly want to know them."

"The coroner?" Mr. Poulden sounded aghast.

"I'm not going to issue a certificate on my present information," was the young doctor's curt retort. "You say Miss Bannerman was virtually past speech. I take it you mean she was sinking? That was the thought in your mind."

"Yes," acknowledged Edwin, rather reluctantly. "As I told Margaret Reeve, I didn't like the look of her. I certainly didn't think she had the strength to leave her bed, let alone the will."

"There may have been a natural explanation for that. I understand you haven't had a nurse on the premises?"

"There was no need," said Mr. Poulden, quickly.

"Even though you thought she was sinking?"

"She has been attended by Dr. Grieve, and Miss Reeve" (he indicated Margaret) "has been quite able to perform any services she required."

"How do you know what services she required? And how much nursing experience have you?" He swung around to the rigid girl.

"I have worked in a children's home."

"That doesn't mean you've had the experience to look after a desperately sick woman."

"Dr. Grieve . . ." began Mr. Poulden, but with an angry gesture Dr. Lamb swept the older man away.

"From all I hear there's not much likelihood of Dr. Grieve being in a position to give evidence at the inquest. In any case, in my opinion, as I told you on my first visit, his treatment of the patient was quite inadequate. She was an hysterical case—I saw that at once—and her heart was in a bad way. Any sudden upset, a rage, a fright, a struggle of any kind, would have been sufficient to procure death."

"That was not Dr. Grieve's opinion," insisted Edwin.

Dr. Lamb concisely consigned Dr. Grieve to his appropriate destination.

"The fact is," said he, "Miss Bannerman could not have lived very long in any case. If she'd been wrapped in cotton batten and put in a glass case, she might have lasted another six months. No more. But that doesn't make any difference to our present problem. What we've got to find out is what happened here tonight. Mr. Poulden, you told me you were troubled about

her condition, and that's why you went for the doctor. Did Miss Bannerman ask you to go?"

"I've been trying to make the point that she was, to my eyes, past active speech. Mind you, she understood me right enough, I've no doubts about that. 'You don't look well to me,' I said. 'Would you like me to fetch the doctor?' She nodded. 'Shall I send Margaret up to you?' I asked. 'Is there anything you would like?' But she shook her head and I thought perhaps she wanted to be left alone to sleep. Naturally, I didn't expect to be away long. I covered her up warmly—she always felt the cold—and she heaved a deep sigh, and then I left her."

"Did you give her any stimulant?"

"No. She had some medicine Dr. Grieve had sent up. . . ."

Dr. Lamb dismissed that as shortly as he had dismissed Dr. Grieve himself.

"I haven't analyzed it, of course, but I should say it's most likely bicarb, with some coloring matter to make it look important. I dare say it wouldn't make any difference. What did he say was the cause of her illness?"

"Her digestion was very poor and she had constant bilious attacks, while her appetite was robust.

"A regular greedy-guts," murmured Dr. Lamb. "Poor old so-and-so. I dare say she'd lived on bread and scrape for years and wanted to make up for lost time. There are plenty of 'em like that."

"Dr. Grieve never suggested that her condition was— serious, Edwin insisted. "Until the last few days . . ."

"Know who I wouldn't like to be?" riposted Dr. Lamb. "Dr. Grieve, when he finds himself at the bar of justice, which I dare say he'll do in the next twenty-four hours. We hang the chap who lashes out at a maddening wife and hits harder than he intended, but all over the country we have these bumbling old humbugs committing legal murder and getting away with it—and a handsome bonus by way of a bill the relatives never dispute."

Mr. Poulden saw at once that he'd been right to keep this pushing young particle out of his house as long as possible. He glanced up and saw Margaret's face as white as chalk, the lovely dark eyes like pits. He'd read the phrase but had never actually beheld the expression until now.

"Did you come up to see if Miss Bannerman wanted anything while I was out?" he inquired.

Margaret shook her head. "You told me she was not to be disturbed unless she knocked."

The doctor looked about him. "What was she supposed to knock with? Her knuckles? She couldn't reach that stick without getting out of bed."

"It was leaning against the chair when I left her." He looked again at Margaret. "You didn't answer my question."

In a voice as shadowy as her appearance, the girl said, "I did not come in. I listened at the door, but there was no sound."

"Then what made you come up at all?" The young man's voice was sharp with perplexity.

"My own room is next door. I came up to fetch something. (This was no time to mention her new arrangement with the child.) "I found Miss Bannerman's door ajar. . . ."

"Ajar?" Mr. Poulden's eyebrows lifted, like thin, dark caterpillars, humping themselves over the barren plain of his forehead. "It was shut when I left the house."

"Sometimes," said Margaret in the same muted tones, "the latch doesn't catch."

"It had caught tonight. I was especially careful."

"For any particular reason?" inquired the doctor.

Mr. Poulden looked surprised. "I have already told you, I was disturbed by her general appearance. I hoped she might drop off and not be roused until my return with Dr. Grieve. I closed the door very carefully. . . ."

"You didn't think of making up the fire?"

"The room seemed quite warm. The window, of course, was closed. Still, as I was saying to Miss Reeve only this evening, you can't rely on the quality of the coal you get these days. I suppose the fire fell suddenly into ash. And then, as I remarked just now, I didn't anticipate being away long."

The doctor was frowning. "So, according to your story, you left door and window closed and the patient drowsy. . . ."

"And breathing in a rather alarming fashion," contributed Mr. Poulden.

"Exactly. And when this young lady came up about half an hour later she found the window wide and the door ajar. What I don't understand," he added, swinging around to the white-faced girl, "is why you didn't at all events close the window."

"Because I didn't come in. Why, if I had, I should have seen her on the floor. But the shop door was ringing and there was no sound. I thought she was asleep and Mr. Montagu—it was he at the door—seemed impatient. . . ."

"So you decided to attend to him first. Well, we are like the famous Red Queen, who ran and ran but never advanced a step. Yet someone opened the window, someone threw everything about. Perhaps you think Miss Bannerman did that herself."

"But of course she did," cried Margaret. "Who else?"

The doctor fixed her with a bright blue eye. "And perhaps you can suggest why, Miss Reeve? Assuming, of course, that the old lady hadn't taken leave of her senses and intended to throw herself down, and, for some reason I can't fathom, decided to open the door first."

"Of course she did not mean to throw herself out. Why should she? No—no. It was to let—*him*—out. And when he wouldn't go she must have tried to chase him." Her voice was so faint the young doctor had to lean

forward to catch the words. Mr. Poulnden was staring at her as if he had no notion what she was talking about.

"You mean there was someone else in here? But who? There was no one in the house but the child and yourself. . . ."

"I mean," said Margaret steadily, "that the cat came up and found the door ajar and must have crept in. Yes, Dr. Lamb, Patsy's little black cat. We were looking for him tonight. We went all around the garden, which would explain why we heard nothing of what was going on here, and all the time, all the time ..." her voice faltered and died. Mr. Poulnden's expression was one of horror and rage.

"Are you telling me, Margaret, that, knowing Miss Bannerman's dread of cats, this one was allowed . . ."

"The door was open," cried Margaret, fiercely. "It was not Tom's fault. The door was open."

"This puts a very different complexion on things," observed Dr. Lamb. "I must say it seems to answer the main questions. But how can you be sure, Miss Reeve?"

"Because as I pushed the door open to make sure all was well, the cat ran between my legs, almost tripping me up."

"He came out of this room?"

"Yes—yes—yes. It's terrible to think that, while we were whistling and calling, Miss Bannerman was dying of fright, for I suppose that's what you will put on the certificate."

"What goes on the certificate won't rest with me," Lamb assured her in grim tones. "It'll be for the coroner to decide the cause of death."

"The coroner!" The word was no more than a shocked breath issuing from Edwin Poulnden's lips. "Surely, there's no need to push matters to that length?"

"My dear sir, a woman has died suddenly in very odd circumstances. According to you, she was in a sinking condition; yet she was able to see a cat in a darkened room and get out of bed. I suppose she hadn't had any sedative. . . ."

"I gave her none," said Edwin sharply. "She had only the egg beaten up in milk at 4 o'clock."

"That 'ud account for the broken cup, I suppose. She has an aversion to cats, though apparently, like them, she can see in the dark."

"She has a candle," Margaret whispered, and he whirled around. "So she has, and there's a spent match here, so no doubt she lighted it. She seems to have recovered from her coma in record time. But a hurricane lantern would hardly stand up to tonight's wind. Well, that explains how she saw the cat and why, I dare say, she never saw it come in. I dare say she may have called out, but of course if this young lady and the child were in the garden and you were looking for Dr. Grieve, there'd be no one to hear. A pity about the stick being out of reach," he added blandly.

Edwin repeated his former assertion.

"Remember, you'll be asked questions in the coroner's court," the doctor reminded him in sharp tones, "so it's important to be absolutely certain of your facts. You may be asked how to explain the stick being moved, unless you think the old lady moved it herself."

"There'd be no sense in that," retorted Edwin, warmly.

"Then perhaps you're accusing Miss Reeve."

"I've accused no one."

"You can hardly think the cat shifted it. And there's no one else."

"There is the child," said Mr. Poulden, slowly.

The color came rushing into Margaret's face. "Mr. Poulden, you can't realize what you say. Patsy has been with me ever since you left. ..."

"And the cat?"

"She was playing with him in the kitchen when she heard you come down, and the cat jumped up and ran out of the room. Patsy came straight in to me. . . ."

"Without troubling to see where the animal went? I always knew it spelled trouble. I was against it from the first, and it was my order that it should not be allowed indoors, and, if it must come in, it was not to go upstairs. And during my dear wife's lifetime my wishes were obeyed."

"Well," said Dr. Lamb sensibly, "I dare say neither Miss Reeve nor the little girl intended it to come up to Miss Bannerman's room, and, but for the unfortunate fact of the door being ajar . . ."

Edwin said again in the same low voice, "The door was not ajar."

"Very well then, it was burst open by the wind, and the cat, being curious as young things are, came prowling in. I dare say he hadn't had the chance of examining the room before. . . ."

"He never came up here," Margaret agreed. "He never came farther than Patsy's room. He ran about with her like a little dog. He'd never have come up here alone, particularly as Miss Bannerman made no secret of her feelings. Even a cat couldn't have remained insensible."

"Then perhaps he didn't come up alone," suggested Mr. Poulden. "Are you quite sure the child didn't come up to this floor for any reason?"

Margaret had a sudden vision of Patsy saying, "I went into your room to fetch the book, and I could hear Uncle Edwin talking next door."

"She went to my room for a book I had bought her. . . ."

"And the cat?"

"I—don't know. I think he stayed in the kitchen. Anyway, she didn't come in."

"You sound very sure."

"If she had," cried Margaret vigorously, "you must have known, because you were in here. She could hear your voice through the wall."

"I always knew the child was untrustworthy. Eavesdropping, eh?"

"Let's aim at a sense of proportion," suggested the doctor. "What

conceivable interest could anything you said to this poor old lady have for a small child?"

"There was great animosity between them. Margaret will bear me out."

"Patsy was afraid," Margaret acknowledged, "afraid that Miss Bannerman was trying to deprive her of her home."

"This is still my house," Edwin offered.

"I am only telling you of Patsy's fear. She is only a child and children attach great importance to trifles. I dare say Miss Bannerman may have said something, uttered one of those foolish threats adults sometimes do, meaning nothing in particular, and Patsy attached great importance to it. I can tell you what she has told me, that she feared Miss Bannerman was her enemy and was working to get her sent away to school or some institution. She never came near the old woman if she could help it, and she was careful to keep Tom out of Miss Bannerman's path, too."

"But apparently, tonight, not careful enough. Dr. Lamb, may I ask exactly what you propose?"

"What I've already told you. I shall report the death, there'll be an inquest. I've no choice. I'm not a private person to consult anyone's interests, not even my own. What happens afterwards won't rest with me. If you want to know what I think, I fancy any reasonable coroner, and they're mostly sensible fellows these days, will find that through an unfortunate oversight, the door was not quite tightly closed, it blew open, the cat walked in and Miss Bannerman lost her head. The verdict will be accidental death and you can get ahead with the funeral as soon as you please. Mind you, I don't say you won't get a few hard looks in the next few days. It's lucky for you the old lady wasn't actually a miser with a box of gold under the bed. It should be easy for you to show you had no motive for wanting her out of the way."

"I?" Edwin's face stiffened with anger. "I regard such a suggestion as being in remarkably poor taste."

"If you take my tip you'll grow an extra skin between now and the inquest," the doctor advised him dryly. "You've lived in a village all your life, I understand. Well then, you know the way people gossip. You can't blame 'em, they haven't much to talk about. This sort of thing's a godsend to them." He turned to Margaret, wondering what on earth she was doing in this household, sandwiched between a cantankerous old besom like the dead woman, and that fox, Poulden, with his face as closed as a tombstone and those impudent, bulging eyes. How she'd fired up the instant the child was mentioned! No absence of spirit there, he reflected, though what opportunities it would have for manifesting itself in these drab surroundings would be hard to guess. The mention of Patsy had been like the striking of a match; the tall, pale candle had leaped suddenly into flame.

Who—what—are you really, Margaret Reeve, when you're not being

Patsy Warren's guardian? he found himself reflecting. Aware of Poulden's eyes wandering over him like two, repulsive, brown insects, he said, in a sharp, impersonal tone, "You'd best accept the fact that all three of you—yes, even the child—are liable to be shot at. But it'll soon blow over. Things do, and though they may like to tell each other that one of you engineered the old woman's death they haven't an iota of proof, and sufficient sense to know that actions for slander do no one any good. The most likely explanation will be that the child was trying to get her cat back or make her own position secure, it don't matter much which way you put it. . . ."

"Patsy regards Tom as she might regard a baby brother," insisted Margaret. "She wouldn't risk his being injured by Miss Bannerman."

"Oh, there wasn't much chance of that. The old lady would have died before she laid a finger on the creature. In fact, that's just what she did do."

"And you came up to let the animal out just before our arrival," said Mr. Poulden with meaning.

"I had no idea he was here," Margaret defended herself. "I had been out looking for him in the garden."

"So you had," Mr. Poulden agreed. "I remember, you told us so. One thing is certain, the cat will be destroyed first thing in the morning."

"No," cried Margaret before she could stop herself. "Where would be the sense? It's too late to help Miss Bannerman. Dr. Lamb, please, please support me in this. You don't know Patsy as I do. She relies on the cat, he has been her constant companion for almost a year, this is not her responsibility, and what good will it do anyone to destroy it now? You will simply have another patient. . . ."

"She's right, of course," said Lamb, turning to the druggist. "No sense shutting the stable door after the mare's bolted. If you must blame someone, blame Miss Bannerman. Blame doesn't harm the dead. All these manias—for that's what hers was—can be controlled if they're taken in hand in time. In a sense, you might say she committed suicide."

"I must assume you're not serious. That is an outrageous suggestion. As for the creature responsible, I haven't the smallest intention of allowing it to remain here. I shall destroy it myself. . . ."

A cry, dreadful in its despair, caused all three of them to jump half out of their skins. Margaret whirled around. "Patsy, is that you?"

The child, in a white nightdress, was standing outside the door, the little cat clutched in her arms.

"I couldn't help hearing. Margaret, you wouldn't let him hurt Tom. You promised. You promised. And it wasn't Tom's fault. He didn't like Miss Bannerman. You know he didn't. Whatever's happened, it isn't his fault. If anything happens to Tom I shall die, too."

The doctor pushed past the others and caught the little girl's shoulder.

"Nothing's going to happen to your pet," he said. "If you take my advice you'll keep a close eye on him, though. By the way, how long have you been hanging about there?"

"I came up to look for Margaret, she said I might sleep in her room and I heard you . . ."

"What's this about sleeping in another room?" Edwin began.

"An excellent idea," said the doctor. "Can't you have your supper with her, Miss Reeve? We've lost one patient tonight—it's too late to do anything about her. But I don't want another hysteric from this household on my hands. I'll send up for the body this evening," he added as Margaret cajoled the little girl into the back room. "It would do no harm to give the child a mild sedative—I'll prescribe one—and when she's likely to have gone off I'll send up the ambulance. And is there no sensible woman hereabouts who'll keep an eye on the child during the inquest? This young woman is likely to be called, and I don't want Patsy—is that her name?—alone in the house. And now you'd better start thinking what story you're going to tell at the inquest."

"I shall tell the truth," said Edwin angrily. "And I trust Miss Reeve will do the same."

"That's what I meant," returned the doctor, in cool tones. "Just make sure it's the same truth. It simplifies things so for the coroner. And I take it you'll notify any relatives there may be. . . ."

"I understand there is no one."

"Lawyers, then? Damn it, man, someone must have given her a reference when she came."

"You compel me to remind you that you are a doctor, not a policeman," cried the goaded Edwin. "Miss Bannerman received her payments through a bank at regular intervals. Once the arrangement was made we never discussed finance. Had she required advice no doubt she would have asked for it. . . ."

"Well, get in touch with her bank. She may have left a will. Not that it matters two straws to me, but these old witches are unaccountable, and suppose a tithe of the rumors flying around about her are true and she really does have a little money."

"I certainly gathered her income was an annuity or at all events could be enjoyed only during her lifetime. I feel sure she either had no capital or had no control over it. In any case, I should be a disinterested person, as naturally I shouldn't be a legatee."

"Funny," said Dr. Lamb conversationally, "how lucky it sometimes is not to have any luck. I suppose she hasn't left the young lady something handsome? Well, as you've just reminded me, it's no affair of mine, but my idea of doctoring goes farther than diagnosing a pain in the belly and writing out a prescription to cure it. More people are ill through the mind reacting on the body than vice versa. I'll look in tomorrow," he added

casually, and took himself off.

After Patsy was asleep an ambulance drew up at the side door of the shop and two men descended. They knocked and were admitted and a little later came down bearing a heavy burden. They closed the ambulance doors, the driver remounted, and the vehicle drove away. Operation Bannerman had been performed with the utmost delicacy and discretion. It hadn't occupied more than a few minutes. Patsy didn't even wake. But at one window after another a light flashed, a window was flung up, words were whispered. By morning it was all over the town that Miss Bannerman was dead and more than likely it was foul play.

four

After the men had gone Margaret came softly into the parlor where Mr. Poulden was sitting, making calculations in a small notebook. He looked up, somewhat startled. "Is something else wrong?" he asked quickly.

"I don't think so," returned Margaret, her voice firm but troubled. "There is something Patsy has told me that I think I should pass on to you."

"I'm afraid Patsy's information comes largely from an imaginary source," was Edwin's comment.

"I have never found that." Margaret spoke with steadfast calm. "It seems that Miss Bannerman wrote a letter in secret two or three days ago, though unfortunately Patsy can't tell us to whom."

"How does she know it was written at all?"

"Because Miss Bannerman gave it to her to mail. I don't like the story at all," she added abruptly. "I don't think she ever made any secret of her wish for Patsy's departure, though goodness knows neither she nor her cat ever went nearer Miss Bannerman than they could avoid."

"Come, Margaret, here is the proverbial mountain from a molehill. Miss Bannerman wrote a letter and gave it to the child to mail. What's so sinister about that?"

"It was the manner of it. She waited till both of us were busy and then she called her into her room and asked her if she could keep a secret. Patsy said, 'You mean from everyone?' and she said, 'Yes, even from Margaret.' Then she gave her the letter and a sixpence and said, 'If you tell anyone I shall know.' "

"This sounds like a very improbable tale," was Mr. Poulden's comment. "Why on earth should she wish to keep a personal letter a secret?"

"If she didn't, why did she call Patsy into her room? She could have handed it to you or to me, but she didn't. She also said," and here Margaret's voice trembled with anger, "that she had a good deal of influence in this household and if Patsy wanted to stay here she would do what she was bid. Patsy, of course, took the letter and promised to say nothing, and did not until this evening, and then only by chance."

"What made her mention it at all?"

"I was saying that it was sad for Miss Bannerman to have no friends or family, but that I feared she had none since she received no letters, nor did she write any. Then Patsy came out with this story."

Mr. Poulden drummed his fingers on the table. They were long, thin fingers and he lifted each high in turn so that his hand looked like some strange kind of insect. Margaret turned her eyes away.

"Admittedly I see no sense in her inventing such a tale," he acknowledged. "Was there no reply?"

"This only happened forty-eight hours ago. There hasn't been much time. But it shows there is someone interested in Miss Bannerman who should perhaps be informed of her death."

"I suppose," said Mr. Poulden with distaste, "it's my duty to examine her papers and see if we can trace any relative. I'll ask you to come with me, Margaret, as witness I haven't destroyed or pocketed anything. No, I won't take any refusal. You and I may trust each other but it's a censorious world and the story of her death is going to make gossip enough as it is."

"Could it not wait till the morning?" pleaded Margaret. "It's too late to do anything tonight, and besides, by tomorrow there may be some reply to Miss Bannerman's letter. If it was to a relative or a lawyer, he may prefer to make the examination himself."

Mr. Poulden yielded without much grace. "Very well, Margaret, that is quite a point. Though, mark you, if there's nothing in the morning's mail, I'll take no denial. Not that I shouldn't be glad to know she has someone to accept responsibility," he added. "I've no wish to involve myself in funeral expenses, and from what I've seen of her possessions they'd not satisfy the most moderate of undertakers."

"I have been thinking," said Margaret. "Mightn't it be a good idea to send Patsy to Mrs. Baird, if she's willing, till after the funeral? No one will want to examine her. ..."

"My dear Margaret," Mr. Poulden expostulated, half laughing, "What could Patsy conceivably have to tell that could prove of the smallest value?" Then, as if struck by a fresh thought, he inquired craftily, "You're not trying to warn me that it was she who introduced the cat into Miss Bannerman's room? If you should think so, you'd best not tell me till after the inquest."

"I meant nothing of the kind," cried Margaret, indignantly. "Of course Patsy didn't. Why, she was downstairs with Tom when you came down. If she'd opened the door you must have seen her; she wouldn't have interrupted you when you were talking to Miss Bannerman."

"Hardly talking," demurred Mr. Poulden. "The poor woman was virtually beyond speech—why, Margaret, what's this?"

"Patsy seemed to think that she heard Miss Bannerman's voice," murmured the girl. "She came down and told me. . . ."

"What did she tell you? I don't doubt it does great credit to her imagination."

"She thinks she heard Miss Bannerman say something about terms and your answer. She thought Miss Bannerman was trying to insist on your sending her away—to school or somewhere—she has a terror of being uprooted afresh."

"I should scarcely consult Miss Bannerman about Patsy's future," was Edwin's dry retort. "If she had had the good sense to come to me frankly, I could have reassured her. I don't like this habit of hers of hanging about in

hallways, eavesdropping. Yes, Margaret, that's the only word. She shouldn't have been on that floor at all."

"I have explained. . . ."

"About the book? I remember. Well, that's enough of that. As I said before, the less I know about her movements and yours tonight the better, till after the inquest at least. You've told me neither of you went near Miss Bannerman this evening. Very well. Stick to that. You may be rather closely examined. In fact," and up went his long, thin hand to caress his long bony chin, "between ourselves, I'm deeply troubled. I wouldn't have had this happen in my absence for a thousand pounds."

The answer to Miss Bannerman's letter arrived the next day. It came from a firm of London solicitors and was signed Holland. Mr. Poulden went up to the post office as soon as he thought Mr. Holland's office would be open, to telephone how things stood in regard to Miss Bannerman.

"In your letter to Miss Bannerman, which I have opened," said he, "you speak of her unexpected change of plan. I feel I should tell you. that I'm not aware what that is, or why it should be so important that you propose visiting Mortcomb, though in the present circumstances . . ."

Mr. Holland cut him short. "All that can wait," said he. "I shall come on the morning express, and shall be obliged if you can arrange for a car to meet me at High Benton. You said, I think, that the inquest is to be this afternoon?"

"Unless there are relatives . . ."

"So far as I know there are none." Mr. Holland hung up. Mr. Poulden came back looking very thoughtful, to relieve Margaret who had been in charge of the shop during his absence.

"You'd best get Patsy out of the way," he warned her, so Margaret packed a few clothes and took the little girl to Mrs. Baird's cottage. The news of Miss Bannerman's death was the news of the moment. Mrs. Baird was delighted to take Patsy in.

"Mr. Poulden doesn't want her encouraged to dwell on what's happened," said Margaret a little nervously. "Miss Bannerman's lawyer is expected from London during the morning. . . ."

"And then there'll be the funeral? One thing, if people must come to a sudden end, it's a good thing it should be someone whose loss won't cause many tears. Come along, my dear"—this to Patsy—"I see you've brought Tom. You'll be able to help me make the pastry later on."

"May I play with the little dolls?" asked Patsy in her clear voice.

"To be sure." From a shelf in an old black cabinet Mrs. Baird produced a nest of dolls, screwed the one inside the other, the smallest being no more than half an inch tall, the largest almost six inches. Each doll balanced and tilted on a rounded base, and was painted with arched eyebrows, black eyes and a rosy mouth.

Patsy began to set them up in a circle and Tom, jumping on the table, patted them ecstatically with one jetty paw. Mrs. Baird accompanied Margaret to the doorstep.

"Is it true," said she, "that Tom was in the old lady's room last night?"

"Who says so?"

"It's all over the village, my dear."

"I suppose Dr. Lamb has been talking. Yes, it's true. Unfortunately the door was left ajar and he stalked in. Miss Bannerman must have seen him and struggled out of bed, slipping on the floor. You know Dr. Lamb says she couldn't have lived long in any case. That's bound to come out at the inquest," she added hurriedly.

"An inquest, eh?" Mrs. Baird nodded. Here was a tidbit indeed and she the first to taste it. She would have liked to keep Margaret longer but the girl slipped away.

"I'll come for Patsy later on."

"She'd best stay here till after the funeral. There'll be a lot of talk, you mark my words." She came closer, putting her lips to Margaret's ear.

"Is it true, my dear, she really had a box of gold under the bed? Ah well, some folks 'ull believe anything, won't they?"

Mr. Holland looked absurdly like one of Mrs. Baird's little wooden dolls, a round pink ball of a face, a round, discreetly clothed body, an old-fashioned tie with a pearl pin, highly polished hand-made boots, a general air of an almost out-of-date prosperity.

Mr. Poulden explained that he had not touched the dead woman's papers and had not known of Mr. Holland's existence until the arrival of the letter.

"I only learned last night that she had written to you," he explained. "She gave the letter to a little girl who lives here, and Patsy had not mentioned it to anyone. Well, there was no reason to suppose it was of any particular importance."

"I intended to come down in any case," said Mr. Holland, drawing off his gloves and following Mr. Poulden into the parlor which he regarded with as much interest as if it had been Thomas Carlyle's study or Beatrix Potter's kitchen. "I had a quite extraordinary letter from my client, with whom, incidentally, I've had no more than a couple of letters in two years."

"She never spoke of a lawyer," the druggist admitted. "I gathered she was quite alone in the world."

"And so she was. I'm only her representative by right of inheritance as you might say. Her brother, Peter Bannerman, a rolling stone if ever there was one, was my client, though I saw little enough of him; but when he died intestate, his estate, such as it was, passed to his sister as his sole living relative. It took me some while to track her down and on my advice

she spent the modest legacy purchasing an annuity. It's always my advice to women of her age and temperament. Then at least she would have an income for life. She had no responsibilities, since Peter also was unmarried, so there was no next generation to consider."

"You spoke of a change Miss Bannerman had in mind," Edwin offered. "As I explained on the telephone, she had said nothing to me. . . ."

Mr. Holland sent him a remarkably shrewd look. "Perhaps you had better see the letter she wrote," he observed. "I need scarcely say it came as a considerable shock to me."

Edwin took the sheet of paper the lawyer handed him. It read:

Dear Mr. Holland,

I believe I told you that Mrs. Pouliden died rather suddenly some months ago, since when I have been in charge of Mr. Pouliden's household, consisting of a young relative and a child, who is Mr. Pouliden's ward. Mr. Pouliden particularly asked me to remain, after his wife's death, and now I have agreed to become his second wife in the near future. You know, I dare say, what village life is like and since we don't want to lose each other's companionship this seems the most sensible arrangement. We have many interests in common and Mr. Pouliden needs someone to look after his house and help him with the business. We are neither of us at all young, and I have great hopes that this arrangement will prove to our mutual advantage. I should like you to make the necessary change in my annuity, as I suppose it should now be put in my new name. The wedding will naturally be a very quiet affair, but you will see the notice in due course. . . .

Mr. Pouliden laid the letter down. His face wore an air of such amazement that Mr. Holland was moved to say, "This comes as a shock to you?"

"I can scarcely take it in," exploded Edwin. "I assure you, sir, Miss Bannerman never had the smallest reason to suppose . . . why, my wife hasn't been six months in her grave, and even if I were ever to contemplate marriage for the second time she wouldn't have been my choice. The disparity in age alone . . ."

"I believe she was no more than fifty-two, though she appeared older," said Mr. Holland, crisply. "A very difficult age in my experience. Mind you, I don't doubt she persuaded herself that you really had made her an offer. . . ."

"I find it very hard to believe anything of the kind," was Mr. Pouliden's reply, uttered in a dazed voice. "To tell you the truth, she gave me the impression of being the kind of woman who is born a spinster."

"All women," said Mr. Holland, dryly, "are born spinsters."

Mr. Pouliden's cheek flushed dully. "I mean the type of woman who is

born to be an old maid. In fact, I still find it difficult to believe she contemplated . . .” His mingled embarrassment and distress silenced him.

“Well, there it is,” said the lawyer. “I wonder if perhaps you were confiding in her any suggestion of a possible future marriage. . . .”

“Certainly not. I shouldn’t dream of such a step within a year of my wife’s death. No, no, she must have been out of her head. . . . Besides, her health was very precarious. The doctor tells me she had less than a year to live. Poor woman!”

“It’s wonderful what the ladies can persuade themselves to believe,” Mr. Holland admitted. “And the older they grow the stronger becomes their faith.”

Mr. Poulden had started to drum his fingers, a habit of his when he was anxious.

“I am wondering if it’ll be necessary for this to be made public at the inquest,” he suggested.

The lawyer frowned. “It’s an awkward situation,” he admitted. “It doesn’t make a very good story. My client, a sick woman, was in a sense under your protection. . . .”

“It’s deplorable. No one appreciates that more than I do. It’s the unluckiest of chances that, on a night when I myself was out, the door should somehow have worked itself loose.

“Naturally I had supposed Margaret would be reliable,” Mr. Poulden defended himself.

“Is that the young lady who let me in?” asked Mr. Holland. “Your daughter?”

A dusky flush blotted Edwin’s sallow cheek.

“Certainly not. She is a distant connection of my wife, an orphan brought up in an institution. I offered her a home and remuneration in return for light duties. . . .”

“To include the care of a child and the whims of an old woman? You’ve an old-fashioned notion of light duties, sir. Still, one thing is certain. You’ll not have her on your hands long. Indeed, I dare say she’s already bespoke.”

Edwin muttered something, and the lawyer continued in the same tone, “Then I think very little of the enterprise of the young men hereabouts. She’s too pretty by half to be moldering here.”

Mr. Poulden was horrified by what he apostrophized as “loose talk.” He hoped most sincerely Mr. Holland wouldn’t deliver himself of any such opinions in Margaret’s hearing.

“I fear that the attractiveness of her appearance is not likely to affect the decision of a coroner’s jury,” he offered in stiff tones.

“In that case they should be exhibited in a museum,” the lawyer assured him. “The wives will all be for hanging her out of hand and the husbands find themselves envying the bachelors among them, if any there be. Now

come, my dear sir, take that black look from your face. I'm sure in a situation as gloomy as this one, we need any light we can find. Be assured I shall do my best for you and let it be known that my client was very well-satisfied with her conditions here. As for the latch breaking loose, well, it wouldn't be the first time such a thing has happened in an old house with a high wind blowing."

Edwin still looked disturbed. "That doctor means to make trouble," he confided. "He's an awkward fellow, and though he only saw Miss Bannerman twice in his life he affects to understand her a good deal better than Dr. Grieve, who was her regular medical man."

"Well, well," said Mr. Holland, rising to show that in his opinion this conversation had gone on long enough, "we must hope the jury are sensible fellows who know what to make of that. And now, if you're ready, I should like to look over my client's papers. I'm sure I don't know what she would have wished done with her possessions. I dare say she hadn't many. Fortunately the funeral is arranged for. The rest of the funds were laid out in the annuity." He bustled up the stairs as he spoke, like a fussy little yacht following a sailing barge. "I arranged with the inn at High Benton to give me lunch at 1:30. I understand the inquest takes place in the Town Hall close by. Is this Miss Bannerman's room?" He swung the door reflectively to and fro. "Yes, it's not hard to see how it could have happened, and—are you considering being represented yourself? No? Ah well, I dare say it's not necessary, but remember the old tag, least said soonest mended. That's never truer than when you're dealing with the law."

He closed the door in the discomfited man's face, and busied himself with the dead woman's papers. There was nothing among them of any interest, not so much as a line in Edwin Poulden's handwriting. Not that he'd anticipated finding anything of the sort. Most likely the fellow was telling the truth when he said he'd never given Miss Bannerman reason to suppose he was interested in her future, but if there had been letters (or anything else that might put the spur on) they wouldn't be here now, and there'd be no proof they'd ever existed. And, he thought sincerely, most likely they never did. He hadn't much in common with Crook, but on this point at all events they would have agreed. When you're dealing with dames, you can scrap all the regulations since they can't count, can't read and every single one of them makes her own rules.

Soon he came tittupping down the stairs. The hired car was waiting for him, and he popped in, saying, "No doubt we shall meet again at 2:30. I've got Miss Bannerman's papers in this little case, nothing of any importance. Is that the young lady who let the cat out of the room?" He stared hard at Margaret. "I hope you've passed on my hint."

And with remarkable agility, he skipped down the path and into the old-fashioned waiting car.

Practically all Mortcomb turned up for the inquest. Mr. Millett had a station wagon and he made quite a nice thing out of it, running it like an excursion really—all but advertising it, which would have put him wrong with the law. The car usually held about eight people, but it held more than twice that number this afternoon. The local bus that conveniently ran at 2 o'clock was packed to capacity, with grown-up people sitting on each other's laps and pretending to be children.

Dr. Lamb was the first witness and an admirable job he made of it. As he told the story, there was nothing spectacular in this death of an elderly woman in poor health, of a nervous disposition who, taking fright because a cat had got into her room, staggered or possibly hurled herself from the bed, flung a number of objects at the intruder, and in a frenzy stumbled and fell. The effect on her heart must necessarily have been fatal. He judged that she must have lain where she fell for perhaps half an hour before she was found, certainly not more. The body was chilling, but that was reasonable in view of the open window and the absence of a fire. Any similar shock, said he, would have had the same result.

Mr. Poulden, who came next, said that he had been with the dead woman less than an hour before; she had seemed drowsy and somnolent and he had decided to get a doctor. Her health had been unsatisfactory for some time, though he hadn't realized she was quite so bad off.

Unfortunately, the doctor who regularly attended her was himself on the danger list and couldn't give evidence. Poulden was certain that when he left the room the window was closed and there was an adequate fire in the grate. He agreed that he had given instructions she was not to be disturbed unless she knocked. . . .

"If she was practically unconscious, you'd hardly expect her to knock," interjected the coroner.

"I didn't, but I was afraid of her overtaxing her strength. If she continued to sleep until I returned with the doctor, I thought that would be all to the good."

He added that he had been away longer than he anticipated. Dr. Grieve's stroke came as a severe blow, and he had called on a neighbor, Dr. Pond, who was not available and had then hunted up Dr. Lamb.

"I understand Dr. Lamb had visited her before. Why then did you first go for Dr. Pond?"

"Because Miss Bannerman had taken exception to some comment or advice Dr. Lamb had given her and told me she didn't wish to consult him again. She was rather difficult and . . ."

The coroner indicated that that explanation was sufficient. Mr. Poulden had nothing more of significance to add, and Margaret was called. Although she had lived under Poulden's roof for so many months, she had mixed so little with her neighbors that to many she was scarcely more familiar than a stranger. She wore her best dress, but that was plain

enough, and a stiff little hat Alice herself might have sported. Her appearance in the witness box drew a little gasp of astonishment from many of the beholders, who began forthwith to wonder if there was more behind the druggist's unpromising exterior than they'd realized hitherto.

Mr. Merton, one of the jurors, regarded her with instant suspicion, knowing that beauty's a snare in which many a good man has been caught to his own destruction. His own wife was as plain as a frying pan, and no young men had ever come whistling after his two godly daughters. Queer goings-on behind the shop of an evening, he wouldn't be surprised to learn, and if that old woman was threatening to make trouble, well, it was mighty convenient she should just drop dead and leave the couple a clear field. A brazen piece, standing there so slim and straight, with her chin lifted, but her hands shaking on the edge of the witness box for all that. It was common sense that if there wasn't some hanky-panky going on, she'd never have stayed in that little rabbit hutch where she only saw the light of day when she took the child out walking.

A little murmur of admiration and sympathy ran through the room for the girl's evident beauty despite her shabby clothes and for the self-confidence with which she met a trying situation.

And now Margaret was giving evidence.

She confirmed Edwin's story up to the time of his leaving the house. She had remained downstairs with the child until Patsy's bedtime. She had then come up to her room, to make it ready for the little girl who was feeling nervous and had asked if she might sleep with her that night.

"When I came out onto the landing I opened Miss Bannerman's door. . . ."

"Why did you do that, Miss Reeve?"

"It was getting very cold and it wasn't the practice to keep a very large fire in her room. I used to go up at regular intervals—well, she used to knock for me. . . ."

"But she hadn't knocked last night?"

"No."

"That surprised you?"

"Not particularly. Mr. Poulden had said she was practically in a coma, but the snow had begun to fall and I thought I would just look in and see if the fire needed making up."

"And did it?"

"I never knew," confessed the girl. "The cat came flying out, almost knocking me off my feet. The next instant the door slammed in the draught. Just as I was going to open it the front doorbell rang. Everything happened at once."

"So it seems. So you went downstairs. Why didn't you see to the old lady whom you knew to be ill, before you answered the door?"

"Since Miss Bannerman hadn't called out, it seemed to me she must still be asleep or unconscious. Patsy was worried about her cat and I was afraid

she might go out in the garden again looking for him. Then, hearing the bell and knowing I was upstairs, she might have tried to open the door and I didn't know who was there. On the whole, it seemed best to attend to that first and then come upstairs."

"But I understand you didn't do so?"

"There was no time. I made up a prescription for Mr. Montagu and brought the cat in from the garden—we had left the door ajar and he had torn out—and then I heard Mr. Poulden return with Dr. Lamb and we all went up together."

"I see, Miss Reeve. What puzzles me, and I dare say puzzles the jury also, is why you didn't at all events pause to close the window. You admit yourself the room was cold and Miss Bannerman was ill. . .

"But I didn't know it was open," protested Margaret.

"Doors don't slam in a room where the windows are closed."

"That is true, but I didn't think of it at the time. There was so much happening, I felt like a machine—run down, open the door, attend to the customer, bring in the cat, then go back upstairs ..."

"Did you happen to mention to Mr. Montagu that you had found the cat in Miss Bannerman's room?"

"No. Why should I? He didn't even know Miss Bannerman, except perhaps by sight. I explained that Mr. Poulden was out fetching Dr. Grieve, and he told me of Dr. Grieve's stroke."

"Couldn't you have asked him to wait a moment while you saw to the old lady?"

"I could, but it didn't occur to me there was anything wrong."

"Not even knowing, as you must have done, her attitude towards cats? Isn't it true she had said she would die of terror if she found herself alone in the room with one?"

"I believe she had. But people say that sort of thing. One isn't meant to take it at its face value."

"On this occasion it happened to be true."

"Oh, I don't think seeing Tom would have killed her. I think it was opening the window, which is rather stiff, and perhaps catching her foot and falling. Oh, it's a thousand pities that Patsy and I were in the garden and heard nothing."

"How can you be sure you were in the garden? You don't know exactly when the cat got into the room, do you, Miss Reeve?"

"Of course not. But we had been looking for him, and Patsy had seen him fly into the garden. I suppose he came back and finding the parlor door open prowled upstairs."

"Did he often go into Miss Bannerman's room?"

"He had never been there so far as I know. We were careful to keep him out of her sight."

"Dear me," said the coroner dryly, "it seems very strange. You didn't

chance to mention to Mr. Montagu that the cat had been missing?"

"Of course not. Why should he be interested?"

"How long did he detain you?"

"Only a few minutes. I made up a prescription. . . ."

There was a sharp intake of breath from the jury. Mr. Merton asked if he could put a question. When had Miss Bannerman first shown signs of collapse?

"I knew nothing of it until Mr. Poulden came in at about 6 o'clock. I took her up an egg in milk at about 4, and she seemed much as usual."

"Did she ask for a doctor to be brought in?"

"She didn't speak of a doctor to me."

"That was the last time you saw her alive?"

"Yes."

"Was she given to these sudden relapses, Miss Reeve? I mean, did it surprise you to hear she was suddenly virtually unconscious?"

Margaret hesitated. She was remembering Patsy's tale of the conversation between the dead woman and Mr. Poulden. In the row of chairs set aside for witnesses, Dr. Lamb noted that hesitation, and glanced up. The girl seemed almost at the end of her tether. He'd seen a fox once just before the hounds got it, and he remembered that occasion now. It was easy to see they were out for a scapegoat, and the girl was the obvious choice. Even now, he believed, she was thinking of the child she had defended so staunchly rather than her own safety. His heart was suddenly moved to a most unwonted pity.

"Well?" The coroner's voice was sharp. "Come, answer the question. It's simple enough."

"I was trying to remember. Yes, I think I was surprised, but then she was very careful of her health, she had the doctor in on very light pretexts."

"You call imminent collapse a light pretext?"

"I didn't know there was any question of a collapse. Mr. Poulden's own words were that he didn't like the look of her, her breathing didn't seem natural to him. To tell the truth . . ." She paused again. Come what may she wanted to keep Patsy out of this.

"That is why you are here, Miss Reeve."

"I knew that she had sleeping tablets, and I wondered if she had taken them and perhaps taken more than a normal dose."

"Can you suggest any reason why she should have done that?"

"I was trying to find some explanation of her being in so drowsy a state. I hadn't seen her myself since 4 o'clock when she seemed bright enough. It was only after Mr. Poulden told me . . ."

"She didn't ask for the tablets, when you took her up the—what was it—an egg beaten up in milk?"

"There was no necessity. They were in a drawer in the bedside table,

she could reach them very easily.”

Dr. Lamb, becoming impatient, here interposed, “Miss Bannerman had had no sleeping tablets within twelve hours of her death.”

The coroner glared at him, but let the point go.

“How long had you been looking after Miss Bannerman, Miss Reeve?”

“I had been employed by Mr. Poulden since Mrs. Poulden died about five months ago. I waited on Miss Bannerman as part of my duties, but I was really there to look after the little girl.”

“And your position was a permanent one?”

“What the hell’s the old buster getting at?” Dr. Lamb wondered. “If he’s got all day to waste, the rest of us have our bread and butter to earn.”

“So long as Patsy remained at Mortcomb.”

“I see.” Just what he saw Margaret wasn’t certain, but the tone of his voice was disquieting.

Mr. Holland created a little diversion by declaring his interest, and saying, “Miss Bannerman had been living at Mortcomb for rather more than two years. She regarded the house as her home and I have every reason to believe, from her own statements, that she was very comfortable there and well looked after. In fact, her last letter to me, that I received on the day before her death, assured me that she’d no intention of changing her abode, but hoped to remain there for the rest of her natural life. I’ve been looking into her affairs which are in perfect order. She lived on an annuity and had no one to profit by her death.”

His eyes were on Margaret as he sat down. It wasn’t for Poulden’s sake but for the girl’s that he was suppressing his client’s last, amazing confidence. He knew something of jurymen, thought of them as Arthur Crook thought of the British police—well-meaning patriots with heads of solid British oak—let him loose his cat from the bag and you’d have them doing arithmetic on their fingers—and toes too he shouldn’t wonder—and deciding that the girl had brought about this collapse because she was afraid of losing a job. Nonsense, naturally. A fresh young creature like that didn’t want to molder with an old crow like Poulden and a desiccated ageing female about as attractive to any other living creature as a flask of vitriol. He didn’t for one instant believe that Poulden had given her any encouragement, but his practice dealt with a good many rum old girls (again Crook’s expression), and he knew that you don’t have to give them much more encouragement than a cheerful good morning or a hand over the road on market day to make them dream of wedding rings. He remembered a line he’d once read by a popular, highly paid lady poet.

You married marriage to avoid having Miss
Put on your tombstone.

Bad poetry certainly, but what excellent psychology. For himself he’d had

enough of this dreary charade. The facts were simple enough, weren't they? The door was ajar, the cat got in, the old woman lost her head, and, shortly after that, her life. Well, it hadn't much value and, like the lease of a tumbledown house, it would have run out in a few months anyway. Even if someone *had* pushed the door open or introduced the cat, there was no sense crying over spilt milk—mud sticks, you can't unscramble eggs—all the old clichés droned through his mind. "Life's for the living," thought Mr. Holland, "and anyway there'd never be any proof."

The jury were dismissed to consider their verdict. People began to look for gloves and hats and glance at wrist watches. Five minutes and they'd be back.

They were out for almost an hour. "What on earth are they thinking about?" wondered Mr. Holland, Mr. Poulden, Margaret Reeve.

It was Mr. Merton who had asked the question who was holding up the verdict.

"It doesn't smell right to me," he insisted. "If they knew about her and cats, they'd take special pains to keep the door shut. And if the cat never went up there before, why should it go up there that day?"

"Why do people go out in cars one hundred one times and have an accident the one hundred second?" demanded another jurymen testily. "It was just one of those unfortunate accidents. . . ."

"Well, was it? That's the point."

"What's the motive, Mr. Merton? No one gets anything from the old lady's death. You heard the lawyer say that. She only had an annuity." .

"She might have had some hold over one of them." He sounded dogged.

"This isn't a film," retorted the foreman irritably. He was an elderly man and he wanted his tea; he'd got a cold coming on, he was certain of it, and he didn't like the sense of death in the air. "This is life."

"Everything that's happened in a film has happened in life first," insisted Mr. Merton.

"And even if a cat was pushed in, that didn't mean she was going to skip it. No, no, it was death by misadventure or accidental death or whatever the jargon is."

Mr. Merton scowled. "How do we know that chap and the girl hadn't been misbehaving themselves?"

"We don't. But what's the odds? You don't murder an old woman because you've been having a bit of slap and tickle with the governess. Poulden's a widower, remember, and one of the advantages of that estate"—he chuckled in a rather sinister fashion, he was a widower himself—"is that you're immune from blackmail. No, no, we're wasting everyone's time. If this was a Crime Club novel I dare say there'd be the most melodramatic explanation, but being just life all we can do is find that she died of an aneurysm, brought on, as it happens, by getting overexcited on seeing the cat, but she might just as well have had a nightmare and

jumped up in the dark and died that way.”

“She might,” said Mr. Merton, sourly, “only she didn’t.” Still, he bowed to superior numbers. As the foreman said, you could suspect Poulden or the girl all around the clock, but you’d never get any proof. And, being a relatively honest man, he had to admit there was one chance in fifty—he didn’t put it any higher—that the cat had got into the room by accident.

So he threw in the towel and they brought in a unanimous verdict of death by misadventure.

five

If Mr. Merton hadn't proved so obstinate, the rest of the story might have taken a very different turn. A few melodramatic spirits might whisper that it was queer about the cat, but nobody had known the old woman, who was considered to have let local society down with a bump by not having a box of gold under the bed or a fortune in stocks, and they wouldn't have bothered themselves further about her. But that hour's delay set everyone's imagination working. The jury must have thought there was something queer about the whole business, and by the time they came back practically everyone else thought it was queer, too. Dr. Lamb had gone. He, like Mr. Holland, believed life's for the living and a good many of his patients had lives that were worth preserving. Mr. Holland shot away in his hired car, leaving a message that he'd make the necessary arrangements for the funeral, and Mr. Poulden and Margaret came sedately home together. It was getting late and Mr. Poulden, like the foreman of the jury, also wanted his tea. That hour's delay had troubled him, too. Business wasn't very brisk at the best of times, and gossip about a druggist does him no more good than an association with suspected murder does a doctor. Margaret put on the kettle and made the tea, and then went to fetch Patsy. Her thoughts were not of the past but of the future. The inquest had been an unpleasant experience; she was thankful Patsy's name had been virtually kept out of it. She hoped Mortcomb folk would be decent enough to stop gossip, at all events in the child's hearing. As she paused at the corner she saw Miss Cross, who was Patsy's schoolteacher, come out of her little house. She paused, wondering if it would be wise to drop a hint. Children can be very unkind without malicious intent. The sooner Patsy was allowed to forget about Miss Bannerman the better. She moved forward, resolved to speak, but Miss Cross, after one hasty glance, turned away and hurried over the road, causing the electrician's truck to put on the brakes with a screech. Margaret's eyebrows shot up. "Perhaps she was afraid I was going to ask her and didn't want to be involved," she reflected. When she reached Mrs. Baird's house, it was obvious that there were more visitors than Patsy present.

"I thought you were never coming," the child reproached her. The little night-black cat came forward and rubbed his silken head against Margaret's ankle. Then he rolled over, staring up at her with opaque topaz eyes.

"I had to get Uncle Edwin's tea. Have you said goodbye and thank you to Mrs. Baird, Patsy?"

Mrs. Baird came out of the kitchen; a murmur of voices came with her like a scent.

"I hear everything went all right," she said. "That's something to be

thankful for, isn't it?"

Her manner seemed to have changed since the morning.

"No one could have blamed Tom," said the girl, "and from the look of him when I let him out he was as frightened as Miss Bannerman."

"She used to throw things at him whenever she saw him," declared Patsy in her clear childish voice. Everyone in the kitchen heard it, and they nudged one another meaningly. Naturally they didn't blame the cat—but someone had been lucky.

Disquieted now, Margaret set out for home, holding Patsy's hand, with the cat stalking beside them. He followed as readily as a little dog.

There was another group in the post office, where Mrs. Rabbit queued it. She hadn't been able to get to the inquest, but neighbors who had hurried back to give her verbatim reports. Margaret, who had been instructed by Mr. Poulden to buy some stamps on the way back, if the shop was open, hesitated in the doorway. An instant silence fell. All the eyes swiveled in the newcomers' direction. Someone tried to pat the child's head.

"You want to be careful of that cat, my dear," she told her. "He's made trouble enough."

Margaret bought the stamps without comment.

"Poor thing!" said another woman, clearly referring to the departed. "Sad to have no one to mourn you. I always say it'll be a consolation to me to know there'll be fourteen at least eating ham and wearing black bands when I'm put away."

Miss Bannerman was buried forty-eight hours later in High Benton graveyard. There was no family vault, her parents sharing a double grave in Nottingham, and Peter, of course, having been buried on the other side of the world. Mr. Holland had set aside a sufficient sum to cover expenses and a modest stone when he purchased the annuity, so that no expense devolved on Mr. Poulden. Neither Margaret nor Patsy attended the funeral, Mr. Poulden giving it as his opinion that their attendance was not only unnecessary but positively undesirable. He himself was not unaware of the hard looks Dr. Lamb had prophesied, but the druggist was a man who had always, as they say, kept himself to himself, and as soon as the earth had been scattered on the coffin he walked back to the cab he had hired for the occasion and was driven home. He found Margaret and Patsy in the kitchen, playing with Tom, which appeared to shock him, though he said little. That evening he reopened the shop, which had been closed for a few hours as an act of respect to the dead woman, and appeared to think that life would go on as usual.

But in this his trust was quite misplaced.

Three days later the first of the anonymous letters made its appearance.

Margaret found it thrust into the letter box, a plain, cheap envelope addressed in somewhat irregular capitals to Margaret Reeve. Inside was a

sheet of paper as anonymous as the roughly printed words.

Well done, Margaret Reeve. Clever girl, aren't you? Only remember that dead women's shoes don't always fit.

Margaret stared at it for so long that she didn't even notice Patsy come up, until the child's voice broke in, "What is it, Margaret? What's that paper?"

"Nothing, of course. An advertisement." She crumpled it up.

"What about?"

"Shoes. Come along, or you'll be late for school."

Patsy hung back. "Must I go to school this afternoon, Margaret?"

"Of course. Why not?"

"I don't like it."

"But you've always enjoyed school. Miss Cross . . ."

"She's funny. And she talks about Tom. Margaret, you won't let anyone take Tom away from me, will you?"

"Of course not."

"And Sheila said he was as good as a murderer. He isn't, is he?"

"You know he isn't. Sheila's a stupid little girl."

Patsy suddenly burst into tears. "It isn't only Sheila, it's all of them. Margaret, let me stay at home this afternoon."

"Very well," said Margaret. She established Patsy in the kitchen with Tom and went purposefully around to the school. Miss Cross couldn't avoid her this time.

"I was wondering if you could have a word with the children in Patsy's class," said Margaret. "They're bullying her about Tom. It's not fair."

"Lots of things aren't fair," said Miss Cross, stubbornly. "It wasn't fair Miss Bannerman had to die. . . ."

"She didn't have to die. Nobody has to die because they see a cat. And, if truth were known, I dare say Tom was as frightened as she was."

"He doesn't look any the worse. Did Mr. Poulden send you?"

"No. I didn't want him bothered. But if you won't be co-operative I shall have to speak to him. Whatever you might think you surely can't agree that Patsy should have to suffer. She's had enough as it is, losing her parents, losing her best friend. . . . Mr. Poulden would approach Mrs. Long direct if I said a word to him," she added more quietly.

Miss Cross climbed down a bit. She didn't want any trouble with Mrs. Long, who was the headmistress. She— Miss Cross—was hoping for a recommendation for a job she was applying for in the near future. "You'll understand, Miss Reeve, I can't be watching the children all the time," she said morosely, "but I'll have a word with them. The trouble is, of course, they hear their parents discussing it "

"There's nothing to discuss," said Margaret, sharply. "Poor Miss

Bannerman's dead and that's the end of it. She might have been dead by now, quite apart from Tom. You know what Dr. Lamb said."

Miss Cross folded her mouth into a tight fold. Pigs might fly, only they didn't. Miss Bannerman might have died from natural causes, only she hadn't. Still, she promised to do what she could.

"What did she want?" asked one of her colleagues, watching Margaret walk away, her head high.

Miss Cross explained.

"You'd think Mr. Poulden 'ud have the sense to get someone else, all things considered," was the colleague's retort.

"Maybe he doesn't want to," suggested Miss Cross.

"If he's going to make *her* the second Mrs. Poulden he might as well put up the shutters. You know, it mightn't be a bad thing if he did speak to Mrs. Long. She wouldn't mince matters."

"Ever hear of slander?" inquired Miss Cross. "Oh well, it'll all be the same a hundred years hence. And it isn't as if anyone will ever be able to prove anything."

A week passed and then the second letter arrived.

You think you're on the primrose path, don't you, Margaret Reeve?
Be sure it doesn't lead to the gallows tree.

Margaret wondered if she should write to Miss Sheppard, but she knew what advice she could expect from that quarter.

"Come home," Miss Sheppard would write. "There's plenty of work to be had, you don't have to stay in Sleepy Hollow." And she might remind Margaret that she'd never really wanted her to go to Mortcomb at all. Margaret would have been glad enough to go but for Patsy. For Patsy she would take any risk, flout virtually any law. But even she could see that matters couldn't go on like this after the third letter came. It was on much the same lines as the other two and written by the same hand. The author hadn't much imagination, but then anonymous letter-writers probably never have.

What does he or she hope to gain? Margaret wondered. There wasn't any suggestion of blackmail, and, anyway, poor and insignificant people aren't open to that particular peril.

In her desperation she even thought of consulting Dr. Lamb, and seeing him in the village the very next day, turned shyly in his direction. Dr. Lamb, however, brushed past her as though he had never set eyes on her before. Margaret shrank up against the wall, a flush of humiliation and anger suffusing her whole body. To her there could be but one explanation of such an attitude. He believed her guilty of the death of a helpless old woman, and if he'd kept his mouth shut at the inquest it was for Patsy's sake. She burned anew to remember how, in her leisure hours, she had let

her thoughts drift in his direction, recalling a look, a word. . . .

"I must get away," she whispered. "If *he* agrees with X . . ."

He might even *be* X, but that notion she discarded as being too fantastic for belief. "If I could take Patsy and go to Miss Sheppard, if Mr. Poulden would agree . . ."

She hurried on, oblivious to passers-by, seeing nothing but Dr. Lamb thrusting past her without so much as the flick of a finger in greeting.

And meanwhile, Dr. Lamb, who had been deep in thought and a hundred miles away to all intents and purposes, got back into his car without a notion of the disturbance he had caused. He hadn't seen Margaret or anyone else, though if he had known the effect on her of his apparent indifference, it would have pleased him very much. One girl was in his thoughts now more than he liked to admit, even to himself.

Business in the shop was quieter than ever. For a day or so after the inquest there had been a procession of people dropping in to buy corn plasters and aspirins and "gawp," as Mrs. Baird put it. But when it became clear that no fresh information was forthcoming, and no amount of hints could persuade either of the principals to utter a word, business died down again. In fact, trade became so slack that Edwin's face seemed to grow thinner and more mournful each day. He spent most of the time in the shop, instead of leaving a fair amount of the serving to Margaret. She wondered if he also was beginning to be coldshouldered, and found a refuge behind his own counter.

Then one gray afternoon, when for a short time Margaret was in charge and Patsy was at school, with Tom safely curled up in front of the kitchen fire, the girl was aware of someone bobbing about outside the window, peering in between the two big jars of colored water and over the cards of corn cures, the bottles and all other paraphernalia of an old-fashioned pharmacy. Two eyes, black as sloes, met hers. The face moved, the door handle was turned, a slight very dark girl, with black hair as smooth as if it had been painted on her skull, came into the shop. She stood for a minute looking about her.

"Did you want Mr. Poulden, Miss Fowler?" Margaret asked. It had been her experience of late that most people who came into the shop when Edwin was absent said something about prescriptions, and, though she volunteered to make them up, and had indeed frequently done so in the past, the customer generally had some reason for wanting to see the druggist in person. The more timid snatched up anything on the counter and pretended they'd come in to buy it in the first place.

Beryl Fowler proved a different customer. "No. I've been waiting for this chance—to see you when he was out of the way, I mean." She came close, those black eyes burning.

(They say black eyes never possess the quality of light, but Beryl's had the brilliance of coals.)

"Why don't you go?" she asked fiercely. "Can't you see what you're doing to him? Or have you made up your mind to ruin him absolutely?"

Her passion was so strong that Margaret felt overcome, as by some powerful animal odor.

"I don't understand. ..."

"Don't you? You don't really expect me to believe that, do you? You've got eyes and you're not an idiot. You know the shop is all he has. Can't you clear out and leave him to pick up the pieces?"

"But I do him no harm. I only hold the fort as it were when he can't be here himself."

"Oh, we all know he does his best, but sometimes he has to be away. It didn't matter in the old days. Alice Poulden was trusted. . ."

"And I am not? How can you say anything so untrue?"

"How can *you* play the innocent in that idiotic fashion?" Beryl's derision was as definite as if she'd spat over the counter. "Do you think everyone doesn't realize the truth about Blanche Bannerman?"

"The truth is what was established at the inquest. . . ."

"Nothing was established at the inquest, except that she died of fright and a fall combined. An hour or so before she fell she was unconscious. . . ."

"Mr. Poulden never said not. She was rather low. . . . She was drowsy, but not unconscious. She was heard to speak. . . ." Margaret stopped abruptly.

"Who heard her? You?"

Margaret said nothing.

"Eavesdropping, eh? I wouldn't put it past you. Though it's queer you didn't happen to mention it at the inquest. Well, what was it she said? You won't talk? Perhaps you're wise. But there's nothing to stop me guessing. She didn't trust you, did she?"

"Why shouldn't she? She had no reason . . ."

"Perhaps she thought she had. Anyway, she was going to see to it that you went back wherever you came from. You fool, did you really think he would look at you?"

"He? You mean Mr. Poulden?"

"I didn't mean the cat. So you thought you'd write paid on the account. It was quite a good idea, but the timing wasn't quite right, was it? You meant to go back and shut the window. . . ."

"Why should I? I didn't know it was open. I hadn't been in the room."

"Yes, that's what you told the jury. They didn't believe you, though. If they had they wouldn't have been out for an hour. As I said, it was clever to put it onto the cat. You knew no one could prove anything."

"If you're suggesting I let the cat into her room . . ."

"I'm suggesting there was never a cat up there. That she didn't throw anything at it or open the window. I'm suggesting that she was in a coma

or as near as makes no difference. . . .”

“In that case how did she heave herself out of bed?”

“Who says she did? You’d been nursing her on and off, hadn’t you? You were quite good at lifting her—she told Mr. Poulden so. You’re young and stronger than you look, I dare say, quite strong enough to pull a sick old woman out of bed. Didn’t they say she banged her head on the floor, probably had some sort of concussion? If you’re concussed, you can’t bang with a stick or try and shut the window that someone’s opened because it’s snowing, and if you get cold it’ll be the end of you. Oh yes, Margaret Reeve, you thought it all out. I don’t suppose it ever occurred to you that anyone would question your story. And by making the cat the scapegoat, you preserved both of you from blame.”

“Both?”

“Yourself and the child.”

Margaret leaned back against the wall. “Have you said this to Mr. Poulden?”

“I can, if I’m forced.”

“You couldn’t prove a word of it.”

“Not a word. But you don’t suppose, do you, I’m the only person who’s thought of it? Haven’t you noticed that people have changed—toward you, I mean? Why do you suppose Mr. Poulden is making plans to send Patsy to another school where the story won’t be known?”

“No,” whispered Margaret, “no, that’s not true. He couldn’t send her away.”

“If you were half as fond of her as you pretend, you’d be glad. They’ll never let the story die down so long as you and she are here. It’s her one chance, can’t you see it?”

Margaret shook her head. “She mustn’t be separated again from the one person she trusts.”

“That’s what you say. But I don’t mind about her. It’s you.”

“If Mr. Poulden wants me to leave he’ll tell me,” said Margaret in bewildered tones, “but he doesn’t believe I had anything to do with Miss Bannerman’s death and, of course, I hadn’t. I didn’t send the cat in. . . .”

Fortunately someone else entered the shop. Miss Fowler stormed out. There were two or three other customers, one of whom brought a prescription that she refused to leave.

“I dare say Mr. Poulden will be in later. If not, it must wait till the morning.”

When Edwin did return she found herself without words. Then she saw he had an envelope in his hands.

“I found this in the letter box,” he said. “It seems to have come for you—by hand.” He frowned. “I wonder why whoever brought it didn’t hand it to you in person.”

“I can tell you that,” said Margaret in quiet tones, though she felt a

pulse hammering in her temple. "Because I wasn't to know who had sent it."

Mr. Poulden didn't pretend to misunderstand. "Has it come to that? Why did you say nothing to me?"

"I thought you'd had trouble enough. Anyway it's probably only some half-mad person. . . ."

"How many others have there been? Have you spoken of them to anyone?"

She shook her head. "Who is there?"

"You might have written to Miss Sheppard."

"She'd tell me, if I was uncomfortable here, to pack my traps and move on, and I can't do that."

She tore open the envelope. She was surprised to find that this letter was different from the first three, inasmuch as it was made up of words and even phrases cut from newspaper paragraphs, advertisements and even magazines. It read:

WHAT ARE THEY THINKING OF TO LET YOU HAVE THE CHARGE OF AN INNOCENT CHILD OR PERHAPS SHE'S NOT SO INNOCENT AFTER ALL WHO KNOWS PERHAPS YOU THINK YOU'VE COVERED YOURSELF BY NOT BEING THE ONE TO OPEN THE DOOR BUT DON'T THINK YOU CAN EVER GET AWAY WITH MURDER. THOSE WHO KNOW WILL BE FOLLOWING YOU WHEREVER YOU GO YOU CAN'T GO SO FAR THEY WON'T CATCH YOU PRESENTLY YOU MAY BEGIN TO ENVY MISS BANNERMAN WHOSE AT PEACE FOREVER WHEN YOU WON'T EVER KNOW PEACE AGAIN.

"Someone has taken a lot of trouble over that," said Mr. Poulden involuntarily. "I can't imagine who . . ."

"I could make a good guess," said Margaret. "Miss Fowler was here not long ago."

"I know. I met her and had a word with her. But surely you can't suppose that she has anything to do with *this*?"

"I can think of nothing more likely. Why, Patsy, how you startled me! And what's the matter? Have you been crying?"

"No," said Patsy, but her voice shook. "Only—you're always in the shop these days when I come home, and I do get so lonely."

"Have you no friends of your own age?" Edwin rallied her.

She shook her mop of curls. "They don't play with me. And Tom sometimes likes to be by himself, and there's no one for me."

"You had better give her her tea," said Mr. Poulden. "I'll look after the shop now until closing time. And I'll keep this," he added abruptly, putting the letter in his pocket. "We must have some talk later. I'd no idea this sort of thing was going on. It shows how the village feels about the situation. You should have told me about this before, Margaret, really you should."

It was late that evening before Edwin put up the shutters. Margaret had exerted herself to comfort the forlorn Patsy and, so far as possible, to drive

out of her mind the cruel and crazy things that Beryl Fowler had said. "Not that I should mind leaving Mortcomb," she acknowledged frankly to her pale reflection in the glass, "but I can't leave Patsy with only Mr. Poulden."

After the child was asleep and she and Edwin had had their supper he said, "I suppose this moment had to come, though to tell you the truth I hoped you would spare me. Those letters should have been warning enough. As to who wrote them, that's of secondary importance. What matters is that they should have been sent at all."

"I dare say this sort of thing always happens when anything in the least mysterious occurs," hazarded Margaret.

"Perhaps. But I don't like mysteries. And my customers don't like them either. Not that I agree there's any mystery to speak of here. Margaret, what in Heaven's name persuaded you to do anything so crazy? Oh, I don't say you guessed it would have fatal results. . ."

"Mr. Poulden, stop, please. You can't mean you agree with Miss Fowler, that I was in any way responsible? It was an accident, tragic and to some extent inexplicable, but no one person's responsibility; though if anyone must take the blame it should be the one who left the door improperly latched."

"The door was tightly closed when I left the house," said Edwin in unemphatic tones. "You assure me the child couldn't have been involved. . ."

"Of course not."

"Then my assumption is inevitable. Ah well, I suppose this had to come to a head sooner or later. Margaret, it's too late to reproach you now, and I don't even want you to tell me why you did it—that would make me accessory after the fact—but for the sake of us all you can't stay here. In your own heart you must have known that all along."

"If you really believe what you say, of course I can't remain here. I wonder you let me stay so long."

"It was for your own sake. If I'd dismissed you immediately after the funeral, everyone would have put two and two together. I dare say the best plan will be for you to let it be known that Miss Sheppard has asked you to come back. It won't seem strange that you should accept, under the circumstances. An older woman would be more suitable, now that there are only the two of us. . . ."

"And Patsy?"

"I am making suitable arrangements for Patsy."

"That does mean you're going to separate us? No, Mr. Poulden, after all that has happened . . ."

"Because of all that has happened. If you really care for the child's future, you'll make the break as easy as possible. Children of that age soon get used to new surroundings; the very novelty takes their mind from the past. As for you, you're young and the world's wide, and perhaps one of

these days you'll be able to put the whole affair out of mind. Naturally I shall feel it my duty to explain the situation to Miss Sheppard, but if I'm asked I can say you're fond of children and, I believe, good with them. But I believe, Margaret, you'd do well not to attach yourself too closely to any one child for the future. Your situation with Miss Sheppard was doubtless an admirable one and she may be prepared to offer you fresh employment."

"And if you are asked for a reference?" Margaret's voice was so low it was no more than a thread of sound.

"I shall tell the truth, that you were here for a short time only, but unfortunately couldn't come to terms with other members of my household. That's the kindest thing you can look for, Margaret, and a good deal more generous than the situation warrants."

"Do you think," asked the girl so gently that he felt his own heart start with fear, "you would be justified in letting a criminal, for that's how you regard me, go into another household? But you shall not do it. I'll fight you. You can make your accusation in public, for you know as well as I you've no proof, there will never be proof. As for Miss Fowler's letter . . ."

"If you wish to accuse Miss Fowler, there are the police. You should take your suspicions to them."

Margaret sank back. "No," she whispered, "I shall never do that. And you know why."

"Yes," agreed Mr. Poulden, "I'm sure that's a wise decision. Now, take off that tragic expression. This was a bad beginning but you've years ahead, and it's lucky for you the report of the inquest hasn't appeared in any of the London papers. Folks in London are too grand and too much occupied with their own concerns to read our local gossip."

"I have a suggestion to make," said Margaret, slowly. "This is no house for Patsy, you said so yourself. Let her go to Miss Sheppard. She's wise and kind and it wouldn't be a complete break. You need have no sort of anxiety about her there. . . ."

"You're making a great mistake, Margaret. Patsy isn't destitute and I don't propose that she shall grow up in a home for nameless brats, which I dare say is an accurate description. Besides, I want her to forget all this, and she'll do that best in totally new surroundings, among people to whom Miss Bannerman's nothing, not even a name."

"But she will fret. . . ."

"She was devoted to my dear wife, but she survived her loss. Even you are hardly conceited enough to suggest she'll feel yours more deeply? No. Now, try and take a reasonable view of this. Accept the situation. You came here and, to put it kindly, things didn't work out as I had hoped. Close this chapter, open another, but never turn back the page. Come, that'll do. You'd best take a dose of sal volatile and go to bed. Things 'ull look better in the morning. They always do."

“They will look just the same,” said Margaret. “I shall still be dismissed in disgrace and separated from Patsy. Nothing else matters.”

“Then we must hope Miss Sheppard will make you see things in a more reasonable light. Come along, and I’ll give you a drink of sal volatile. You can be sure that, once you’re away from Mortcomb, you’ll get no more letters. People’s memories are short and before long even your name won’t be remembered. I’ll let it be known that Miss Sheppard particularly asked for you, and we’re not great towngoers in our little corner of England.”

Still smiling, cold as a dog’s nose, he stood up, and setting his hand on her arm guided her into the empty shop.

Up in her room Margaret stood like someone in a daze. She looked around the plain little chamber as though she had never seen it before. Presently she began to open cupboards and drawers and to sort her small belongings. Her head roared like the shell Patsy liked to hold to her ear.

“If I could fall asleep and forget it all, all,” she said aloud, casting her eyes about her. After a moment she slipped through the connecting door into the room the dead woman had occupied. “I dare say Mr. Poulden will have removed her phial of sleeping tablets,” she thought. But he had not. Gratefully she seized them. Then returning to her own room, she found pen and paper and sat down to write, at the old-fashioned marble-topped wash-stand that also served as a dressing table with a silvered glass hung on the wall.

The child, Patsy Warren, woke from a horrid dream, to find herself shaking from head to foot. She had been in a train with Margaret—no one else in the carriage. Margaret had left her for a while. “Stay there and look at your book. I shan’t be more than a minute.” Patsy had read her book until she realized Margaret had been gone a long time. She looked through the window down the corridor but there was no one in sight. She was just going to open the door when the train ran into a tunnel and immediately all the lights went out. She called Margaret but for some reason her voice made no sound. She was going to call again when she heard footsteps coming along the corridor. Then the door of the carriage slid back.

“I thought you were lost,” she panted.

“All alone in the dark?” said a voice. And it wasn’t Margaret at all. It was Uncle Edwin, and at once she knew she was in the most terrible danger. He said something about little people with too long tongues, and she tried to scream, but she was quite dumb. Then someone else came along the corridor and the door of the carriage shut with a decisive click. A moment later the train sailed into the open country and she found she was quite alone.

It was at this juncture that she must have wakened with the sound of that click still in her ears. The room was quite dark; there had been a night light burning when she went to bed but something—someone—must have blown it out. Margaret, prepared for such an emergency, had given her a little torch that she kept under her pillow, shaped like a dog with eyes that lighted up when you pressed a button. She put out a trembling hand and pushed down the switch. As in her dream she was quite alone in the room except for the little cat, who came stalking up the coverlet and rubbed his head against her hand. Patsy scrambled out of bed and pulled on a dressing gown. The sound of that clicking door was so loud in her ears it was hard to believe she hadn’t actually heard it outside of her dream. And it was possible. Mr. Poulden might have come creeping in again as he had done before, even though Margaret might pretend not to believe it. Not waiting to find her slippers, and with Tom tucked under her arm, Patsy noiselessly opened the door and peered out.

The house was perfectly dark, as dark as the train had been; there wasn’t a sound. Not a gleam of light showed under the door of Mr. Poulden’s room across the hall, and the floor above was impenetrable as the night. The child stole across the landing and felt her way up the stairs, her heart thudding.

She became aware of the smell when she reached the next floor and turned the handle of Margaret’s door. It didn’t yield and she realized that it must be locked. She rattled it softly, stooped and put her mouth to the

keyhole. Something sweetish and sickly came into her mouth, making her choke. She knew now what it was. Gas was escaping. Margaret had a pair of gas jets in her room. "Great extravagance," Uncle Edwin used to say, "I hope you never light more than one." Patsy rattled the door frenziedly, but Mr. Poulden was shut up downstairs deep in his own thoughts, and Margaret had gone where she couldn't hear anything at all.

There had been a case in the next village not long before, where a man had gassed himself and his family. Margaret had tried to keep the story from the child, but you might as well try to prevent the wind from blowing. "If I don't get in, Margaret will die," thought the little girl, frantically. It was hopeless to try and knock down the door—and then she remembered the connecting door from Miss Bannerman's room. She hadn't been inside the room since the old woman's death, had shrunk from it in case some of the stories you heard were true and people who had died suddenly or in a state of terror returned to haunt their former abode. But there was no time for selfish terror now. If only that door weren't locked also! She tried it and it wasn't. She ran in with the cat at her heels. Tom was a great comfort. They said animals saw more than humans, so if there had been a ghost there, invisible to her eyes, he would have known and drawn back. But he came frisking in without any hesitation. Patsy flashed the torch and saw that there was a chest of drawers pulled across the doorway. It had never been there before, but then in Miss Bannerman's time she had sometimes wanted attention in the night. The child pushed furiously at the piece of furniture. Fortunately, being empty it was not immovable, though budging it meant straining with all her might. But she pulled it out a few inches and turned the handle, and the door opened into Margaret's room.

It opened inwards and when she dashed forward she caught her foot on something (it proved to be a towel) that for some reason lay on the threshold, but she picked herself up and dashed for the window, putting her arm over her mouth as Margaret had warned her she should do if ever she found herself in this dire emergency. There was no catch here—the whole house wanted pulling down and rebuilding according to modern ideas—and she struggled with the strength of desperation and heaved up the sash.

The wild night air came pouring in and she hung over the sill, filling her lungs with its freshness. But there was no time to be lost. She tore over to the bed. Margaret lay there, heavy with the smell of death, feeling nothing of the hands dragging her, the voice hoarsely calling her back to this world. Now a hissing sound impressed itself on the child's consciousness and she realized that both gas jets were on full. They were too high for her to reach and she had to find a chair and stand on it, and then pull the chair around to the other side of the fireplace and turn the second tap, choking as she labored. But at last it was done. Margaret must have turned

the key in the lock before she got into bed and Patsy now unfastened the door and threw it open wide.

But Margaret did not stir. "She's dead," whispered the frantic child, "she's dead."

Forgetting her fear of the dark she went tearing down the stairs, the faithful Tom still at her heels.

Mr. Poulden was sitting in his study, as he called the tiny room he kept for himself, when the door was flung wildly open and a tousled apparition flung itself upon him. It babbled incoherently.

"What is it, Patsy? Have you had a bad dream?"

She said something about Margaret. "Margaret has gone to bed. She's very tired and needs her sleep. You wouldn't try and wake her, would you?"

"It was the gas, the gas was on, I can't wake her. Come up, come up." She tugged at his arm, the tears beginning to stream down her cheeks.

He seemed to take a long time to understand her but at last he rose and went marching up the stairs, with Patsy clutching at his coat. The brisk night air had already dispersed much of the gas, though the room was still overpowering.

"She had locked the door," sobbed Patsy. "Oh, wasn't it lucky I remembered about Miss Bannerman's room?"

"You'd better wait outside," ordered Mr. Poulden, but he might as well have spoken to the wind.

"Make her wake up," the child insisted. "Make her wake up!"

"This is a shocking thing," said Mr. Poulden, soberly. "I'm not sure. . . ."

"Give her something to make her wake up." She sounded like a little mad creature.

The druggist was standing by Margaret's side, shaking her shoulder.

"Margaret!" said Mr. Poulden. "Dear me, I daren't light the gas for fear of an explosion."

"I've got my torch. Look." She thrust it forward. By its beam she saw a glass of water at the bedside and picking it up she dashed the contents in the unconscious girl's face.

"What are you doing, Patsy? Come. There's nothing you can do for Margaret. Go back to bed. What on earth brought you up here at all?"

"I had a dream . . . Uncle Edwin, she moved just then. I saw her."

He thrust her out of the room, saying he didn't want two invalids on his hands, but she could not rest. Pausing only for her slippers, she tore down into the hall. Mr. Poulden hadn't locked the front door and she ran out in the road with some confused idea of fetching the doctor. She had a conviction she couldn't have explained that if she didn't get the doctor Margaret would die.

And, as Crook would have said, how right she was.

Dr. Lamb was returning from a protracted labor in which he'd saved the mother but not the child, and was both angry and exhausted by such a waste, when his headlights picked out a small figure waving madly from the roadside.

"Who on earth lets a child be out in the dark at this hour?" he thought furiously, jamming on the brakes. The child flung herself on his arm as he leaned forward and opened the car door. He recognized her at once; she was a child it would be hard to forget.

"What on earth's the matter? Is your uncle ill?" But even if he were, what was that girl housekeeper doing, letting a child roam about in a nightgown after 10 o'clock at night?

She panted "Margaret" and "the gas" and "Come, oh come," tugging all the while at his sleeve. Dr. Lamb seemed to understand the situation a good deal more quickly than Mr. Poulden had done, and he left the car by the road and went racing into the house, pulling her along behind him. The little cat, like some minute familiar, still ran at their heels. Patsy had left the front door open and the man on the top landing heard the sound of their feet thundering up the stairs. In a trice he was back in the girl's room, reaching up to turn off the gas jets that were on full again, crossing the floor to fling up the window, seizing the towel and tossing it into a corner.

"Hurry, hurry," panted the little girl.

"Take it easy, Andromeda, a jet plane has nothing on me," Dr. Lamb retorted. Thrusting Mr. Poulden out of the way he leaped into the room, flashing his big torch around the walls. Then he was on his knees beside the bed, an arm behind the unconscious girl's shoulder, forcing her to sit up.

"How did this happen?" he exclaimed, and then without waiting for a reply, almost bawled, "An emetic, at once, mustard will do. Great Heaven, man, you a druggist and not to think of that!" Now all was confusion and haste. Mr. Poulden ran down; Patsy, dismissed from the room, followed; and where Patsy went Tom went, like a faithful hound.

"The mustard's in the dining room." She had got the sideboard door open and put the tin in his hands.

The doctor's voice bawled down the stairs. "I shall want hot water, put on the kettle."

"I will do that," said Patsy, rushing into the kitchen.

Mr. Poulden turned, tripped over the cat, swore and went up the stairs, his heart blacker than the night.

"Keep the child out of here," ordered Dr. Lamb. "She's seen enough to give her nightmares for a week."

Mr. Poulden stayed upstairs, hovering uncertainly on the landing.

"This is a dreadful thing," he said, over and over again. If he could have pulled a switch and blown the whole place sky-high, he thought he wouldn't have hesitated. Fortunately, while Patsy was downstairs, he had

found the unfinished letter on the washstand and disposed of it. It would never have done to let *that* fall into official hands.

When at last Dr. Lamb came down, knowing his patient was safe and making a mental note to send a nurse as early as one could be procured (because there was something here he didn't understand), he found Patsy in the kitchen. She had lighted a candle and brought out a tray, fetched down the big teapot and set a loaf and some butter on the table.

"You've learned your way about young," he congratulated her. "You'd be none the worse for a cup of something hot yourself, if you're to avoid pneumonia."

"How is Margaret?" The blue eyes were enormous in the pinched face; the shadows under them were like saucers.

"She'll be all right now. I'll just take a cup of this fine tea and go up again. And Nurse will be coming along soon. As for you, you deserve the lifesaver's medal. Without you, the whole of Harley Street wouldn't have saved her."

"She's not going to die, Dr. Lamb?" Her hands strained at his wrist.

"You'll spill my tea and I shall be scalded and shan't be able to look after anyone," he threatened. "No, of course she won't die. Why should she?"

"There was Aunt Alice," whispered the child, fearfully. "And Miss Bannerman. But they had Dr. Grieve."

"He won't be coming again," Charles Lamb promised. "And Margaret won't die. When she's better she'll be able to tell us what happened."

Edwin came in from the scullery, looking as haggard as a winter tree.

"This is a dreadful thing," he said abruptly, ignoring the child. "If it gets about Mortcomb, I shall be ruined. How she could do such a thing under my roof ..."

"She didn't," protested Patsy, bursting into tears. "She wouldn't, not and leave me."

"Now, Patsy, I'm sure Dr. Lamb agrees you should go back to bed," said Mr. Poulden with authority. "I wouldn't have had this happen for the world."

And that, of course, was true.

"This time luck was with you," remarked the doctor. "The young woman should be no worse in twenty-four hours. As for what the village has to say, well, the doctor who can prevent people talking will end as one of the world's six richest men."

He encouraged Patsy to drink some hot tea, paying no further attention to his host.

"And your uncle is right, you should go back to bed."

"I don't want to be alone. . .

"I'm coming up with you. And Tom."

"The night light went out," she muttered.

"Then you shall have another—two, in fact, in case anything goes amiss with the first. Have you a fire in your room?"

Edwin started. "A fire? In a bedroom?"

"Why not? Miss Bannerman had one, if you could call it a fire."

"It wouldn't be safe, not with a child."

"A deal safer than with a topsy-turvy old woman like that one. Anyway, I take it you've a fire screen—indeed, I see one there. We'll take it up, Patsy and I—where d'ye keep your wood? That's it, Patsy. You carry the kindling and I'll bring a bucket of coal."

He hurried about, with the child at his heels, leaving Mr. Poulden to fume unnoticed.

"Margaret . . ." began the little girl .

"Her door's open, and I've got ears on sticks for the first sound. I'm not going home yet for a while, in any case. I'm going to stay with your uncle. . . ."

Edwin was tapping out a familiar rhythm on the kitchen table. No one would suppose *he* was master here; yet in the circumstances what objection could he raise? He watched the doctor go, with Patsy's hand in his. Extraordinary how a coarse, loud-mouthed fellow could turn into velvet where a child was concerned. He heard sounds of movement and presently even laughter from the room upstairs. He was grateful for this brief respite while he sorted his thoughts and worked out a story. That had been an odd thing for a child to say—about those two women dying—he had heard it from the scullery. He drew Margaret's half-written letter to Miss Sheppard from his pocket. It was well for him he'd found that before anyone else knew of its existence. Tearing it up small, he thrust the scraps into the stove that Margaret, with care and economy, kept burning day and night. He began to walk restlessly up and down. Once he went into the hall to listen, but he could hear nothing of the conversation on the floor above. He came back to the kitchen. It was as though a curse lay upon him. He remembered Alice and her country superstitions about curses and the power of the dead. He shivered and crouched nearer the stove. He dared not go near Margaret, and even if he did there was nothing he could do. This fellow would be as good as his word, send in some interfering woman . . . One thing, he reflected, it won't seem strange that I should send her away now. So, striving for a gleam of daylight in the darkness that encompassed him, he waited for the doctor's return.

He had boiled up the kettle and was sipping a fresh cup of tea when at last feet sounded on the stairs and Charles Lamb joined him.

"I don't know if you keep any spirits on the premises," said he, "but if so I could do with a couple of fingers. I'll have done as much work in an evening as many a fictional hero in a week."

Scowling, Edwin unlocked a cellaret and produced a very little whiskey

in a bottle.

Lamb took it from him and gave himself a generous shot in the cup of tea he had scarcely tasted.

"That'll be all to the good. And now, Mr. Poulden, tell me what happened."

"You know almost as much as I. The child came into my room babbling about gas. . . ."

"I mean before that—why she should attempt to take her own life. From what I've seen of her I'd have said it was the last thing she'd do, with that child on the premises."

"I fear she was beyond consideration for others," replied Poulden, sourly. "The fact is, I'd told her I couldn't keep her here any longer. There was too much talk in the village and it was doing me harm I couldn't afford. You mix with the people a good deal yourself, Dr. Lamb. You must have heard it."

"About Miss Bannerman, you mean."

"Yes. You'd expect people to have affairs of their own to occupy their attention. . . ."

"Oh come, man, you can't be such a fool as you'd like to make out. Of course they talk about Miss Bannerman. It 'ud be against human nature if they didn't. And of course they don't believe it was an accident the cat got into the room."

"And they are right," said Edwin heavily. "I taxed Miss Reeve with that last night. . . ." he glanced at the watch on his wrist. "Is it still the same day? So much seems to have happened. . . ."

"You mean you accused her of being responsible for the old woman's death?"

"It was a choice between her and the child and she swears it wasn't the child."

"So you set yourself up against the coroner's jury and pronounced sentence of banishment."

"How could I keep her here? Next time she might have turned against me."

"Only as it happens the only person to be hurt was herself. Did she leave no letter to explain her action?"

Edwin shook his head. "There is nothing."

Lamb was watching him very narrowly. Then his gaze turned eloquently enough to the kitchen stove, a fragment of black ash lay in the hearth.

"So you burned it? You're a rash man, Poulden. The police don't like interference from the laity."

"The police! You mean to call them in?"

"Attempted suicide's a crime as much as attempted murder, which indeed is what it is. Our lives don't belong to us any more than most of our other possessions these days. Not that they ever did. In the old days they

were held to belong to Ood. Now they belong to the State, and the State doesn't like being bilked any more than anyone else. What did Margaret Reeve say in that letter? She didn't admit responsibility for Miss Bannerman, I suppose? Of course not, or you'd have kept it."

"I don't admit there was a letter, but she was greatly distressed when I told her she must go. Well, what choice had I? Already there were anonymous letters—the last of them came today. I have it here." He thrust his hand into his pocket and produced it.

Dr. Lamb glanced at it without much interest. "Have you any theory who may have sent it? I see it didn't come through the mail."

"It could be anyone. It was in the letter box. I found it there myself. As you know, the private door is around the corner and I dare say no one would notice a passer-by stuffing it through the slot."

"Particularly if the passer-by made a point of choosing his time when there were no spectators. But you'd have to show some motive for Miss Reeve's wanting the old woman out of the way."

"Miss Bannerman was very jealous, and she didn't care for children or animals."

"Then she could have found herself some other lodgings. You'd scarcely let her rule your roost."

"Of course not. But Margaret conceived the idea that I meant to send Patsy away. I don't know what Miss Bannerman may have told her. . . ."

"I suppose," said Lamb thoughtfully, "she hadn't any notion of stepping into the late Mrs. Poulden's shoes— Miss Bannerman, I mean."

"That's an outrageous suggestion. Such a thought never passed through my mind."

"It's not your mind I'm concerned with, but hers. She never hinted . . ."

"She never said a word to give me such an idea."

"Or perhaps she thought you were planning a match with Miss Reeve."

Edwin jumped to his feet. "Dr. Lamb, that's enough. I'll not be insulted in my own house. What—I, a widower of six months' standing, propose marriage to a girl of eighteen who was no more than a servant in my own house?"

"Come to that," said Dr. Lamb, coolly, "we're all servants in our respective spheres, and if you heard the opinions of some of the wives I visit as to their positions in their husbands' homes . . . well, never mind. Let that ride. But you're a queer fellow to be insulted by the suggestion that a girl like Margaret Reeve 'ud be prepared to marry you."

Mr. Poulden stared. He couldn't believe his ears. Here was someone else suggesting that Margaret was in some way—remarkable. He'd never heard anything so fantastic, a girl from an orphanage without a penny to her name. More than ever did he miss old Grieve, who'd never given the hussy more than a passing glance.

"Such a thought never went through my mind," he said, "and I trust

you'll be discreet in your suppositions in the neighborhood."

Dr. Lamb laughed. "Well, if it never occurred to you, it might seem less fantastic to Miss Bannerman. Maybe that's why she stayed on after Mrs. Poulден's death to chaperone a bit," he added explanatorily.

"I can assure you, Dr. Lamb, you are quite mistaken. Miss Bannerman remained here at her own request. It was not particularly convenient, but I found it hard to refuse her, seeing she'd been so good during my wife's illness, helping in the shop and sitting with Alice. . . ."

Dr. Lamb stroked his stubborn chin. "What was the cause of Mrs. Poulден's death?"

"What on earth has that to do with it? Gastroenteritis was what Dr. Grieve put on the certificate. By the way, what news of him?"

"Of Grieve? He died this morning. I thought you would have heard. Yes, a blessing to all concerned. He was out of his head after that stroke. Not that he wasn't as mad as a hatter at the best of times," he added grimly, "imagining he was capable of prescribing for those not as sick as himself. Well, he's gone with all his sins on his head, and those patients fortunate enough to survive him can take a new lease on life. Gastroenteritis, you said? Was there any particular occasion . . . ?"

"She would partake of mushrooms. They were a passion with her."

"And she loved them even to the death. Well," he shrugged, "she wasn't my patient and it's no concern of mine, as you're so clearly assuring me. About Miss Reeve ..."

"Exactly. If you take this story to the police it will spell ruin for us all. Whereas if you smooth things over, well, she'll be leaving my house as soon as she's fit to travel, and girls of eighteen are inclined to be hysterical. . . ."

"I know my duty," said the doctor, dryly. "Now mark you, Poulден, if I say nothing it's not for your sake but for that little girl's. She's had enough to make her a nervous invalid for months. Not that you've any hope of keeping this a secret; but maybe we can bilk the law for once. We're always hearing how overworked our police force is, so they should be grateful to us. Now I must be off. I'll be sending Nurse Wilson along as soon as I can get hold of her. You've no telephone here? No. I remember. She's a decent woman, she won't make trouble, but she'll see to it that Miss Reeve can leave this house on her own feet. Did you know the girl had taken a sleeping draught before the gas was turned on?"

"I saw the phial of tablets, but it doesn't make sense. If she intended to use gas . . ."

"It wouldn't be the first time a would-be suicide changed her mind. In any case, she'd had something. . . ."

"She took some sal volatile at my orders before she went upstairs. . ."

"Look at it which way you like, it's going to be hard to explain how gases turn themselves on, but Nurse Wilson won't talk, not if I tell her to

keep her mouth shut. And the authorities won't be sorry not to be bothered. Nobody likes attempted suicides, and it doesn't make sense to shut a girl in prison because her life was so unattractive she wanted to lose it."

He set down the cup he had been holding. "I'll take another look at her," he said. "And it might be as well to turn off your gas from the main until morning. It's the child I'm most concerned with now," he repeated. "I'll be around to see her tomorrow. And remember, you're not out of the woods yet. Saints pity us, man, you've had one unexplained death on the premises and only just escaped a second. You don't want a crazed child to add to your collection, I suppose? You should be curator of the Chamber of Horrors, if that's what's in your mind?"

Leaving Mr. Poulden stark with apprehension, he marched out and started up his car. Mrs. Baird, who was awake with the toothache, came to her window and saw the lights of the car outside the chemist's shop and wondered who was *in extremis*, that Dr. Lamb should need to get him up after 10 o'clock when, as was well known, he wouldn't open the door to Old Nick himself. You might have expected a doctor to carry essential drugs. It wasn't till next day that it occurred to her there might be a more melodramatic explanation of his presence.

She was still up half an hour later when the car went past again. Once more it stopped outside the druggist's and someone alighted and knocked on the door. This was opened and the person went in. After a minute or so the car drove back toward Dr. Lamb's house and, though she waited quite a long time, there were no more developments that night.

When Margaret opened her eyes the next morning she found Nurse Wilson sitting beside the bed.

"That's better," said Nurse Wilson. "How're you feeling? What on earth possessed you to do such a silly thing? And in someone else's house, too. Got into some sort of trouble?"

It was the most usual reason for attempted suicide, though in Nurse's opinion it was a bit old-fashioned to try and put out your own light just because you were going to have a baby without benefit of clergy.

Margaret was watching her in a puzzled way. She pulled herself erect, then dropped back against the pillow.

"Why are you here? What's happened? I do feel ill."

"Well, you can't expect to try and gas yourself and feel as bright as a bobbin the next morning," pointed out Nurse Wilson, reasonably.

"Gas?" Her mind moved more slowly than usual today; it was a minute before the implication sank in. Then—"I don't know what you're talking about. Gas? How could I? I never use it. Mr. Poulden thinks it's extravagant in bedrooms. I have a candle." She looked at the table beside the bed that Mr. Poulden had thriftily put together out of a couple of

packing cases. "It's there still."

"So it is," said Nurse cheerfully, not looking a whit surprised—it took a lot to surprise you after ten years in a village. "But that isn't what was on last night. If it hadn't been for the child . . ."

"Patsy! Where is she?"

"Gone to school, of course. And a good thing, too, after last night's upset. It was her found you, you know."

Margaret put a hand over her eyes. "I don't know anything except that I feel terribly sick."

"Well, if you haven't had all that gas up you'd better get rid of it now," said Nurse sensibly. "Dr. Lamb . . ."

"Has he been here?"

"If you'd let me finish one sentence in ten you might learn something," Nurse pointed out, good-temperedly. "Yes, that kid ran out and got him."

"Patsy did? In the night?"

"Bit of luck, for you, wasn't it, that Mrs. Bridge's baby came prematurely. Not that it stopped long enough to see the sort of world it was coming into. Yes, he was coming home and the kid was at the gate and he stopped—she was flashing a torch like mad, lucky he's not in hospital, too. Come to that, there's been a lot of luck about this. Think you could keep some hot tea down? Well, have a try, anyway."

While Margaret cautiously sipped the hot tea Nurse Wilson brought her up to date.

"Anything you tell me 'ull be off the record, she offered generously. "No one's got such a bad memory as a nurse when it's trouble. Like water off a duck's back, it is. Now then, what was wrong? Must have been something pretty desperate when a girl like you tries to take her own life."

She'd always held that the quiet ones were the slyest. To look at this girl—and everyone knew about her devotion to Patsy, it shone out like the child's torch last night—you'd think butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, but there'd been all that talk about Miss Bannerman, and they had luck getting the verdict they did. But suppose it was true that her death had been engineered and Margaret knew something was going to come out?

The girl was speaking again, in broken, agitated sentences. "Nurse, it's not true. I didn't turn on the gas. I wouldn't take the chance. Suppose Patsy had come up with a candle?"

"Well," said Nurse reasonably, "gases don't turn themselves on, do they? And what made you lock your door?"

"I—I didn't. I couldn't have. I never do."

Nurse looked at her shrewdly. "I suppose you do know what you're saying?"

"Of course I know. It's all coming back to me. Mr. Poulden told me he was making other arrangements for Patsy and he wouldn't want me any more. I came up to write to Miss Sheppard—why, of course," her face

brightened a little, "that'll prove the truth of what I say. The letter . . ."

"No one's found a letter," said Nurse, stolidly.

"But there was one." Tears of weakness came into the girl's eyes. "I wrote to ask if I could come back to her. She's the only home I ever had after I left the orphanage. It must be on the table."

But it wasn't, of course.

"And do you generally sleep with your window shut?" inquired Nurse.

"Never. You mean it was . . . Oh no." She sank farther back in the bed, as if oppressed by the weight of wickedness that seemed likely to submerge her.

"Of course it was. Now look, my dear, I'm old enough to be your mother and I've seen plenty of trouble in my life. This isn't the first time I've seen a girl try to take the easy way out, or what she thinks is the easy way. You be grateful you'll get a second chance, it's more than plenty of people do. Mr. Poulden's been doing his best, and if you do what you're told we might be able to keep the case out of the courts. Why, what's so funny about that?" For the girl had broken into a storm of weak laughter that shook her like a palsy.

"Pull yourself together," said Nurse robustly, "and be grateful for your luck. If the three of us—Mr. Poulden and the doctor and me—did our duty, you'd have the police around the bed instead of me. Trying to take your own life's a criminal offense. As to why I'm not asking questions; there's times when it's best to know nothing. I came in because Dr. Lamb asked me to give an eye and help you to get your traps together. Point is, are you going to be fit to travel this afternoon?"

Margaret said, "What's going to happen to Patsy?"

"The child? She's going to Mrs. Baird, I understand, till Mr. Poulden can make other arrangements. It's not exactly a piece of cake for him, when you come to think of it. Now, you've some place to go, I believe, when you leave here?"

"There is Miss Sheppard. I told you I was writing to her. . . ."

"Well, you won't have to worry about that, because Mr. Poulden telephoned to her this morning and she'll be expecting you. Mind you, you won't feel your best, but you've only yourself to thank for that. And the sooner you're out of the way, the better. Nip gossip in the bud. Not that you will do that, of course, but what they say about you when you're gone won't hurt you."

She bustled about, packing Margaret's belongings.

"Is Patsy coming back to lunch?" the girl asked presently.

"You try and get it into your head that the best thing for that little girl is for her to be out of the way till you're gone. It was enough to upset her for a month of Sundays, finding you like that."

"I wonder why she came up. It was like Providence, wasn't it?"

Nurse sniffed. The arrogance of the human creature, imagining

Providence was going to work overtime preserving it from its own folly.

"I hear the doctor now," she said. "He's just going to give you the once-over. If he doesn't think you're fit to travel, he'll have to send you to the hospital. . . . Mr. Poulden doesn't feel he can take any more responsibility."

Dr. Lamb came in and nodded to Nurse, who went downstairs.

"How is Patsy?" asked Margaret.

"You didn't think much of Patsy last night when you turned on the gas," was his unsympathetic reply.

"I didn't do any such thing. I've been explaining to Nurse, but, of course, she doesn't believe me."

"It was suicide or murder," said Charles Lamb, dryly, "and you'd have your hands full trying to prove it was the latter. In any case, if it's really the child you're so concerned about, the best thing you can do for her is vamoose. If you stay here the story's bound to come out, and the authorities will have to take action. If you're out of the way they can turn a blind eye on the whole affair."

"I am afraid for Patsy," insisted the girl.

"Patsy's under my eye at the moment, and I understand she won't be staying here much longer. Whoever has charge of her will see to it she's all right. I'm not going to ask any questions and that way I shan't hear any lies."

"I knew it would be no use, but—Dr. Lamb, you will try and keep an eye on her? Too much has happened under this roof—Aunt Alice, Miss Bannerman, me. Next time it could be Patsy."

His grim manner softened. "Nothing's going to happen to Patsy, I can promise you that. She won't be staying here. Well, naturally not," as Margaret uttered a gasp of relief. "You may think Mr. Poulden's a danger to her, but just pause and consider what a danger she could be to him, if she went round spreading this story. It's common sense that people prefer cake to bread and butter, and that's what your version (and hers) would be. No, no, Mr. Poulden's not fool enough to take that risk."

"But will she be safe?" Margaret persisted.

"I fancy we're at a stage where a further accident might start tongues wagging so furiously that even Mr. Poulden's reputation for sober behavior, which I believe is great, might be swept away. No, no, my dear, you can't carry the whole world on your shoulders, and it's sheer vanity to think you can. I don't know what plans he has in mind, but I don't think you need fear any fatal outcome for the little girl."

"She has no one," whispered Margaret. "Once I am gone ..."

"You're not going into another world," the doctor pointed out.

"It is the same thing."

"Now you're talking nonsense. Lie back and relax. You won't be fit to travel in anything but a hearse if you carry on like this."

Margaret lay back more quietly. There was nothing she could do now,

and at least Dr. Lamb seemed more prone to accept her explanation than he had done hitherto. She must wait till she reached London. Miss Sheppard would believe her. And then a new fear came to torment her troubled mind. What if Miss Sheppard didn't? Suppose Edwin had got in the first word?

And, of course, Edwin had.

Miss Sheppard's new helper, a sturdy, no-nonsense type called Elsie, had just settled the kids to their tea when the door opened and the boss came in, followed by a girl who looked like somebody's shadow. One of the little boys pointed and said in triumphant tones, "Margaret," and two more echoed Margaret like the copy-cats they were. One little girl actually got up and ran around the table.

"This is Margaret Reeve," said Miss Sheppard, who sometimes seemed to think she was Queen Victoria, 1954 edition. "She's going to stay with us for a little, between jobs, and she'll be able to give you a hand, Elsie."

"Not before it's needed," agreed Elsie heartily. Her grandmother would have thought she was lucky to be employed by Maud Sheppard; Elsie knew Miss Sheppard was the lucky one and knew that Miss Sheppard thought so, too. "I sometimes think if centipedes had hands instead of feet I'd pass for a centipede. Now then, Brian, shove up. Harry, where are your manners? Get a chair for Margaret, and you, Betty, get one for yourself. You're not a baby any more, you're three years old. You can't expect to be waited on all your life."

Margaret looked horrified, but the children didn't seem abashed. It seemed natural to them to get a good-natured clout when they started trouble. It gave them an opportunity to say "I'll tell my Mum on you," and when Elsie retorted briskly, "I should—and send a jet to the moon to look for her while you're about it," they thought it no end of a joke.

Miss Sheppard tactfully melted away. You could say that for her, reflected Elsie; she did know when she wasn't wanted. A rare virtue in an employer, who generally seemed to think you couldn't have too much of a good thing, not when she was it.

She pulled a little girl's hand out of the jampot and sent her to wash. The child went off roaring, but she went—like the wind. "Hang about and argue and you'll have to go just the same; only difference is there won't be any jam left by the time you get back." Elsie had got that much into their dear little wooden skulls, if her spelling was her own. She shot a shrewd glance at Margaret Reeve. She had her own ideas. The girl looked a wreck, and then coming without any warning . . . There'd been a telephone call that morning that meant trouble of some kind, Elsie decided, and (counting on her fingers, four months, nearly five), it shouldn't be hard to decide what. Still, it 'ud give Elsie a break sometimes and say what you like, we all know they're the hope of the future and the wealth of the nation, but kids can be damned boring in large doses. So, "This suits me," she said confidently, pushing plates of food in Margaret's direction. Soon she'd find out what it was all about. Trust her.

In his office at 123 Bloomsbury Street Mr. Arthur Crook answered his

telephone.

"Yes?" he bawled in a voice that would have startled a ship in a fog. "Who? Oh, Maudie. Don't say you're coming to me for advice."

"You've already given me so much I haven't been able to use," retorted Miss Sheppard in tones as crisp as the white blouse she wore, "I thought this time . . ."

"You won't take it, of course," Crook warned her. "Dames never do. But who am I to complain? If they did, my gas bill 'ud be halved, but what would I have to put on my bread? I'll tell you—butter, nice, healthy, uninteresting butter, whereas me, I've got a sweet tooth."

"You'd better bring it with you tonight," suggested Miss Sheppard. "We have a little trouble on our hands."

Even over the telephone you could feel Crook's ears quiver and his eyes light up.

"Not a nice little mare called Murder by any chance?"

"That's what I want to discuss."

Crook said in dubious tones, "There's the police . . ."

"I've heard you say a dozen times they're only interested in corpses."

"And there ain't a corpse here? Well, of course not. If there was you'd pass it on to the proper quarter. Right, Maudie, be seeing you."

Sitting in her parlor, waiting for Crook's arrival, Miss Sheppard secretly took stock of her young friend. You couldn't say she'd actually lost weight and she had always been pale—no, the truth was her face was grown-up. She had been a gentle, biddable girl, though Miss Sheppard had never underestimated her capacity for strength. But now it was as if the youth had been wiped out of her face. She was barely nineteen but she might have been ten years older.

"I want you to tell Mr. Crook everything," she was explaining. "Never mind if you haven't any proof—he'll provide that, it's what he's there for. And don't imagine anything you say will shock him. Atom-proof, bomb-proof, kiss-proof, that's Arthur."

In breezed Arthur, jumping over the side of his little red car, known as The Scourge. "Hope you've got the chain up," was his greeting. "You want to look out for the press when this breaks, and don't think they'll wear badges to prove who they are. They come in all shapes." (He often warned other people about slander, but never took the smallest precaution himself.)

He wasn't the shock to Margaret that he usually was to new clients, because she had seen him before. She said at once, "I haven't done anything wrong, Mr. Crook," and he patted her hand with his own that was the size of a postwar leg of mutton, and with his brown eyes so bright you could light a candle at them, he said, "Don't try and pull the wool over your Uncle Arthur's eyes, sugar. If you weren't in a jam I wouldn't be here."

And very nice, too," he added, generously. "Now let's have all the bundle, and don't leave out the bits you think don't matter. I'm like a doctor, I'm the one to say what symptoms point the road. From what Maudie here"—he beamed at Miss Sheppard—"tells me, you think this character tried to put out your light? That so?"

"Gas jets don't turn themselves on, as Nurse Wilson pointed out, and I didn't touch them. I never used the gas upstairs, and there wasn't anyone else ... no one to suspect, I mean."

Crook nodded. "Some circumstantial evidence is very strong, as when you find a trout in the milk," he beamed. "Any idea why he should want you out of the way? I mean, you hadn't got anything on him, had you? He was payin' you wages, he could give you a week's notice?"

"He'd just told me I should be coming back here, but that was part of the plan, to give me a motive for suicide."

"And *his* motive?" repeated Crook patiently. Every dame wanted a thing said four times over, was his experience.

"It was because of what Patsy heard the night Miss Bannerman died. Mr. Poulden said she was past speech— Miss Bannerman, I mean, but she wasn't because Patsy heard them talking. Miss Bannerman was— threatening him, I think, is the word."

"And she came down and told you? And you didn't know any better than to spill it to Mr. P.? You dames do like doing things the hard way. All the same, I doubt if a child's word would count for much, especially after so long. And juries don't care about keyhole kids at the best of times."

"Patsy wasn't eavesdropping." Margaret rushed to the little girl's defense. "Miss Bannerman was a little deaf, you had to speak rather loudly, and there is only a connecting door between the rooms."

"If you say so, sugar. Well?"

Margaret continued with her story.

"So you opened the door . . ."

"And Tom streaked out."

"And that surprised you?"

"I was horrified. Miss Bannerman wasn't only afraid of cats, she hated them. Patsy and I were always on the watch to see that Tom kept out of her way. Not that he ever showed any wish to go near her. 'Get away, you beastly thing,' she'd shout, and she even threw a clothes brush at him once. I imagined he'd followed Patsy up and slipped in without anybody seeing, until she told me she had had the cat in the kitchen until Mr. Poulden came downstairs."

"So then you thought . . ."

"Mr. Poulden must have left the door ajar and for some reason Tom had crept in."

"Could Mr. Poulden not have been responsible?" asked Miss Sheppard in her downright way. "If he wanted to give the old woman a shock ..."

Margaret looked doubtful. "Tom never let Mr. Poulden come near him. He'd have scratched and howled, and we would have heard. And there were no scratches on Mr. Poulden's hands."

"Gloves?" murmured Crook.

"Yes. That is true. He was wearing them. But Patsy said Tom had gone into the garden."

"Habit of his—going into the garden, I mean—snow on the ground and all?"

Margaret smiled faintly. "He was courting," she admitted. "There was a little cat over the way. That was another thing Miss Bannerman hated. Cousin Alice had never had Tom neutered—people don't in the country as they do in towns—and now and again Miss Bannerman would see the pair of them from her window. 'Disgusting,' she would say. 'I can't imagine what Mr. Poulden can be thinking of.'"

"These old maids!" offered Crook, indulgently. "Still think they came out of a water lily, I dare say. Still, is your face red? Not been doing much thinking yourself, have you?"

Margaret looked amazed. "I don't understand."

Crook turned to Miss Sheppard. "Can you beat it? Held the winning card all along and never thought to play it. Why, you've just told me yourself how it happened. Lucky for you, you weren't picked up for givin' false evidence at the inquest. "Let's have it again in words of one syllable. You turned the knob and pushed the door and . . ."

"Tom came out."

"Did he stop to say How-do?"

"Really, my dear, you must use your wits," exclaimed Miss Sheppard in vigorous tones. "It's perfectly obvious, and I can't imagine why I didn't think of it for myself. What Mr. Crook means is—you opened the door and a cat came out."

"Yes, but—oh! You mean, it might have been *the other cat*?"

"I mean, I'm darn well tooting it *was* the other cat. Didn't stop when you called—didn't go lookin' for its owner—simply streaked off into the garden."

"Yes. But—Mr. Crook, Bonny never came into the house."

"I never said she did. But I suppose she could have been brought in. And if you're goin' to tell me that with a boy friend on the other side of the door she wanted much encouragement, well, all I can say is my education's been more neglected than even I guessed. In a way," he added musingly, "it's a pity your Mr. P. and me are on opposite sides of the fence. I do like a chap to show enterprise, and you can't say he missed much. That cat incident, for example—that can't have been worked out. Found her waiting on the mat, say—what color? I don't think you said."

"The cat? Black—with white shoes on her forefeet."

"Well, maybe she took her shoes off in a lady's room. Not that Miss B.

'ud be likely to stop and look. 'That beastly cat,' she said, and started chucking things like mad. Could be it was in with her quite a while before she noticed it. Cats ain't like dogs, they don't go dashing round a strange place like bulldozers seeing how many walls they can knock down in five seconds. And just as all Chinese look the same to us, so all cats looked the same to Miss Bannerman. Don't tell me that in a dark room and suddenly faced with a monster she's going to stop and ask its name."

"Mr. Poulden couldn't know that Margaret was going to open the door," objected Miss Sheppard.

"Well, no," Crook agreed, "but who cares? He'd have stuck to it he'd never seen the little lady and how come she was up on the third floor? Three guesses, brother, and hand back any you don't want. Who's goin' to suspect our Mr. P.? 'Twasn't as if he came into a fortune with her demise, or had been dickeyin' about with her investments. Never play the giddy goat with a dame who's got a lawyer behind her," he added in parentheses.

"And the motive?" inquired Miss Sheppard. "There has to be some reason."

Crook sighed. "Your faith in humanity touches me, Maud, really it does. Reason's about the last horse most chaps put their shirt on. Fact is, of course, he wanted Miss B. out of the way, while *she* meant to stay on, on her own terms."

He paused, beaming at her. "Presently," suggested Miss Sheppard, "you'll get around to telling us what they were."

"Oh, I'd say she was all set for wedding bells. No, don't get me wrong. I don't think it was a case of a lady past her first youth losin' her head over another woman's husband; but for the first time in years she'd dug herself in, and she didn't intend to be uprooted. People talk sometimes as if these old girls were half-daffy anyhow, but that ain't my experience, and I should know. What she wanted was security, some hole no one could bounce her out of, and she wasn't very secure as a lodger under a widower's roof, particularly as she probably guessed he had an eye on someone else. There was only one way she could safeguard her future, and that was with a weddin' ring. Mind you, I haven't seen that letter she wrote to her man of affairs, but it wouldn't surprise me to know she was preparin' him for Blanche Bannerman, new version."

"You mean—and really, Arthur, there's no need for all this song and dance round the bushes—she intended to marry him, and she was in a position to force his hand?"

"Don't it seem that way to you? And as for what she had on him, I give you three guesses and you ought to be able to hand me back two on a plate, with parsley around the edge."

"Something fishy about the first Mrs. Poulden's death," proposed Miss Sheppard, displaying a quite horrifying coolness (horrifying to Margaret,

that is), just as though men putting their tiresome wives underground was an everyday occurrence. And Crook would have said most likely it was.

"You mean, Aunt Alice didn't die of mushroom poisoning?"

The shock in Margaret's voice was so intense that Crook held her hand consolingly.

"Well, I don't think it was only the mushrooms. I mean, why her and neither of the others? Mind you, it was taking a chance all right, but old Grieve was such an old bumbler he'd probably be glad to have the diagnosis provided for him. And then, Poulden was such a respectable fellow."

"He was also," put in Miss Sheppard briskly, "a druggist, with access to drugs and poisons and a most convenient knowledge of them. I wonder how Miss Bannerman found out."

"She was in an' out of the sick-room *and* the shop," Crook reminded them both, "and, not havin' much else to do, she probably knew a lot more about what was goin' on than the dear departed." He turned to Margaret. "No suggestions, sugar? No billets-doux for our respectable druggist? No mysterious telephone calls?"

"There wasn't a telephone on the premises."

"Chap deserves to be murdered," said Crook, simply. "Any visitors—out of shop hours, say?"

Margaret shook her head. "The fact is, I saw remarkably little of Mr. Poulden. It was mostly him and Miss Bannerman in the parlor, and Patsy and Tom and me in the kitchen. And there was a long hall between them." Crook frowned in Miss Sheppard's direction. "You brought her up too nice, Maudie," he observed. "No gossiping, no listening at keyholes. I know. The perfect lady. And what good's that going to do her now? If she'd snooped a bit or hung around the Grapes or the Blue Raven or whatever the name of the local pub is, she might have learned a lot. I can't help wondering," he added, shrewdly, "how much Miss Bannerman knew. She must have been pretty sure of herself to dictate terms the way she did. The ordinary thing would have been for her to clear out after Mrs. P. died—especially as she didn't like children *or* cats."

"Of course," said Miss Sheppard, whose hearty acceptance of a situation that shocked Margaret almost beyond speech was on a par with Crook's own commonsensical attitude, "there is another solution. Miss Bannerman may have had a hand in Mrs. Poulden's death. She had the same opportunities. ..."

"It don't add up," said Crook, simply. "Say she did put out the old girl's light, that ain't going to encourage the widower to pay his addresses to her. Why, he might be next on the list. On the other hand, it wouldn't be any good anyone tryin' to get him jugged for murder, even if they did dig up the body and find it reeking of arsenic or what-have-you, because any counsel worth his salt could put the blame on Miss B., and she's gone

where there ain't no counsels to get you out of a jam. Any jury would have to give him the benefit of the doubt. Still, I bet, Maudie, I wouldn't be in Mortcomb half an hour before I'd have more evidence for the prosecution than your young lady's picked up in four months."

"Margaret wouldn't know how to manufacture evidence," was Miss Sheppard's rather chilly retort.

"Oh well," Crook allowed, "some can and some can't and those that can't had better keep out of the ring. Now, sugar, put on your thinking cap. Did Mr. Murdering Poulden ever have a jane to tea?"

"No one ever came to tea."

"Well, maybe he went out sometimes."

"Yes, of course, but I don't know where. And not often to tea because he'd be in the shop. And Miss Bannerman would be hopping about like a bird on one leg waiting to pour out for him."

"Go on reminding me he tried to put your light out," said Crook, "or I shall begin feeling sorry for the chap. Still, it all helps. If females will turn themselves into albatrosses and tie themselves round the necks of ancient mariners, they can't expect much mercy. Still, put on your thinking cap. Wasn't there one female more than all the others who seemed to have his interests at heart?"

"There was Beryl Fowler. I feel sure she wrote the last of the anonymous letters, if not the first three. . . ."

"So you've remembered there were some letters? Nice of you to mention them. How's this Miss Fowler—for looks, I mean? One of these knock-you-off-the-perch-ers?"

"She's not pretty, but she's very intense and—yes, I think she is in love with Mr. Poulden. She spoke to me as if she hated me—for being there at all."

"Maybe she did, sugar. Mr. P. ever put on an act for your benefit? Two lonely hearts—or A man's as old as he feels? Any tender passages—hm?"

"Never. He never thought of me except as someone who could be useful. . . ."

"And swept into the cemetery when he was through with her? Now, this Miss Fowler. Well-padded, would you say?" He put his big thumb and forefinger together and rubbed them suggestively.

"She owns her own house and she has a car. I don't really know her, but Mrs. Baird used to speak of her as if she were an heiress."

"That's the best of livin' in a village. It's like livin' on a TV screen, except that it don't black out so often. So all dear Edwin had to do was hang his hat up behind the door—always assuming he don't hang himself first. Won't be my fault if he don't. I never was mean with my rope."

"You're jumping about in the dark like a flea, Arthur," said Miss Sheppard, severely, and she was probably the only woman living who dared address him by his given name. "There's no evidence that Mr.

Poulden has any matrimonial plans.”

“Had some good reason for putting his bosom’s wife underground,” retorted the unabashed Mr. Crook, and, if you don’t think he did, tell me why he wanted Miss Bannerman out of the way. Murder’s like the House That Jack Built. Once you begin you can’t stop. Besides, hardly any chaps know when they’re well off. Not that I should complain. My practice wouldn’t be half what it is if human beings had as much sense as apes. Mate once for life,” he added proudly. “Chap in the zoo told me.”

Miss Sheppard was looking distressed. “There’s more behind this story than I supposed. It might be wisest to approach the police—I believe they’re very sympathetic. . . .”

“Sympathetic as my Aunt Fanny’s fat cat,” was Crook’s rude rejoinder. “Why, they’ll laugh their great fat heads off. No, thankee. When I’m in the market for trouble of that kind I’ll tip you the wink. Why, all their sympathy ’ud be for the widower—losin’ his wife, havin’ his lodger die in suspicious circumstances, trade failin’ off, gal turning on the gas—it ’ud be a piece of cake for them, icing, marzipan and all. Besides, Maudie here says they’re so sympathetic, but you can’t be sure they’ll take your version of what happened last night. And if they do you’ll have to bring a charge against Mr. P.”

Margaret shrank back. “How could I do that? I could prove nothing.”

“Just so. The fact is, you haven’t a ghost of a case. You and me may know he put the cat in Miss Bannerman’s room and turned on the gas last night—even you and me don’t *know* he poisoned the late Mrs. P.—and the Home Secretary’s very unaccommodatin’ about diggin’ up the dear departed—but the most likely thing ’ud be for you to find yourself in a nuthouse. It’s safer than a grave. You can dig up a grave.”

“You don’t understand,” protested Margaret. “It’s not myself I’m thinking of, but Patsy. I believe she’s in danger.”

“Not the way you mean,” said Crook. “Even Mr. P.’s got enough sense to understand there’ll be trouble if one more female connected with him qualifies for the undertaker. Nor he won’t use her ill.”

“He’ll put her in an orphanage,” Margaret cried.

“Where she’ll be a lot safer than under his smothering wing. Fact is, sugar, so long as you lay off she’ll be O.K.”

“Mr. Crook is right,” agreed Miss Sheppard. “Unless you’re going to bring a charge, which you can’t conceivably substantiate, you’ve no right to try and track Patsy down. You’re a minor and no relation, not even the most distant. He could probably obtain an order against you—there are names for it—an injunction, I think it is. . . .”

Crook cupped his chin on his big hand. “It’s tough,” he acknowledged, “but so long as Patsy don’t know her power he won’t make any move. Now, use your head, girl. If she was to start talking about Miss B. other chaps might do likewise.”

“You mean”—Margaret was incredulous—“I should accept the situation.”

“You pays your money and you takes your choice. Either you let ’the little girl alone or you go to the police and tell them Mr. Poulden tried to gas you.”

“It is the truth,” protested Margaret.

“Truth,” said Crook “—and I’ve said this till my tongue aches—is what you can make the other chap believe. Now, Maudie, you let her simmer down a bit and maybe if you was to write a nice line to Mr. P. and ask him what’s happening to the little girl, just to satisfy Margaret here . . .”

“I shouldn’t believe a word he said,” interrupted the girl. “I’m like the police, I want proof.”

Crook stood up. “If you get in a worse jam let me know, and I’ll come climbing over the prison wall. But till I can do anything for you—I told you, Maudie, janes never accept advice—it’s good-bye for now.”

And clapping on his brown billycock he took his leave. “He doesn’t understand,” said Margaret, watching the little red car vanish down the road. “Patsy saved my life. You wouldn’t ask me to do less than that for her.”

“You’ve no proof she’s in any danger,” Miss Sheppard insisted.

“I’ve no proof that Mr. Poulden poisoned his wife or frightened Miss Bannerman to death or tried to gas me. The only proof about Patsy will be when she falls accidentally out of a window and gets run down by a car, and I don’t choose to wait so long.”

eight

"I'm worried about Margaret," Miss Sheppard confessed to Arthur Crook. "I don't know what she means to do. . ."

"Be your age, sugar," said Crook, kindly. "What can she do?"

It wasn't often that Crook was caught napping, but he had his great red head under his wing then. He ought to have known by this time (and afterwards he admitted as much) that when a dame sets out to get her own way, a gangster hasn't anything on her. Rabbit punch, jostle, gouge and no holds barred, that's a woman when she's made up her mind.

It was no wonder, said Crook, feelingly, that sensible chaps, like himself, remained bachelors.

At first Margaret did nothing desperate. She wrote to Mrs. Baird asking for news of Patsy, and she sent the child a postcard of a black cat, with her own address on the back. Mrs. Baird wrote back that she was well and Patsy was well and they both hoped Miss Reeve was feeling more herself, which was a pretty strong hint that Margaret needn't strain her eyes looking for a letter from the child. A few days later Margaret followed up her postcard with a doll's tea set for Patsy and asked for news of Tom. Mrs. Baird wrote back that Patsy was very pleased with the tea set, couldn't write as she'd hurt her wrist but was quite well. Margaret's premonitions deepened painfully. A damaged wrist wouldn't have prevented Patsy from putting a couple of crosses at the foot of the letter. She drew a deep breath and wrote to Mr. Poulden.

Edwin retaliated by writing to Miss Sheppard. He said he felt sure she would agree with him that it would be best all around if the acquaintance (he wouldn't employ a stronger word) between Margaret and the little girl came to an end. Patsy was making new friends (he didn't say where) and seemed to be in good health. If Margaret was really attached to her, she would fade prettily out of the picture. Patsy's nerves had been badly shattered by the events of Margaret's last night at Mortcomb, and the doctor agreed (but he didn't say which doctor) that she'd do better to make a fresh start.

Miss Sheppard carried the letter to Margaret. "You won't like it, my dear," she said, "but he has a great deal of sense on his side. That little girl has gone through a good deal. First she loses her friend, Mrs. Poulden, then there's all the upset about Miss Bannerman, next she finds you at death's door—it would really be kindest to let her put all that behind her."

"A fresh start," murmured Margaret thoughtfully, paying about as much attention to Miss Sheppard as Crook would have anticipated. "I notice he doesn't say where."

"You'd hardly expect him to," retorted Miss Sheppard in a rather tart

voice.

"And if presently Patsy should die of diphtheria or be drowned bathing or—oh, one of the many fatalities that do overtake children, particularly when they've no one special to care for them, I should never know. You don't put a paragraph in the newspaper every time a child dies."

"You're thoroughly morbid about this," said Miss Sheppard severely.

Margaret didn't even show heat. "Perhaps being nearly murdered has affected my judgment," she said, and went off.

Because she had no other confidante who would help, she turned to Elsie. Elsie heard the story without any kind of astonishment or disbelief. It never occurred to her it mightn't be true. She knew that's how life is. "Good enough for the *Sunday Post*" she observed. It was the highest praise she knew.

"I don't happen to want Patsy to be served up as a tidbit in the *Sunday Post*" said Margaret in tones of such quiet violence Elsie exclaimed, "Well, I'm glad it's not me you've got your knife into. I'd start planning my obituary notice right away."

"Elsie, I've been offered a job—through an agency—and Miss Sheppard's very anxious for me to accept it."

"You don't get in my hair," said Elsie frankly.

"I think it's quite a good idea myself. I shall have a day off a week and I mean to go down to Mortcomb and find out the lay of the land. I'm telling you this so that if something should happen there'll be one person who knows the lay of the land."

"You mean—Girl's Body Found in Quarry?" Elsie was frankly thrilled.

"Something of that sort. I had hoped Mr. Crook—but he's no use."

"Rum old bird," said Elsie. "Makes you believe in all that stuff about the missing link, though, doesn't he? I mean, put a gorilla in a hand-me-down suit and you could put up the pair of 'em in an identity parade and no one could tell the difference."

Miss Sheppard was relieved when, she heard of Margaret's new job. To her mind it was precisely what was wanted, something to take her mind off the shock she'd received. She still found it hard to credit Mr. Poulden with a deliberate murder attempt. The only thing more difficult of acceptance was that the girl should have taken such a chance with a child in the house. In any case, life isn't static, and you can't go backwards. Patsy was a milestone and already she was behind. Margaret's job was to go on to the next one. Mrs. Irvine was a much-married lady with four young children and a fifth on the way. She wanted Margaret to look after the other four, get the two oldest off to school and be responsible for the other two until number five put in an appearance. It wasn't to be a living-in job—Mr. Irvine was all right as men go, but there's no sense putting temptation in their way—and that suited Margaret, too. She found a very small room at the top of a very tall house and moved in with her one

fabric suitcase and a spare pair of shoes in a paper bag. The landlady was an overworked woman, called Shaw, long since deserted by her husband, and there was a “helper” who’d have been called a general houseworker in the old days, rejoicing in the name of Gloria. Inevitably some of the young people—house for young business people was Mrs. Shaw’s description of her premises—thought it frightfully funny.

Mrs. Shaw said to Glor . . .

you know the kind of thing. Margaret caught a glimpse of anonymous men and girls on the stairs as she hurried to and from work, but in the evening everything was quiet, except for the inevitable radio. She sent Elsie a postcard giving her her address and Elsie said, “Home from home,” and that was that.

One of the Irvine children came down with pleurisy before Margaret had been in the place a week, so she abandoned her first free day; and the same thing happened the week after. Mrs. Irvine took it for granted that Margaret should stay on. But the third week she got a whole day off and set out immediately after breakfast for Mortcomb. She told no one where she was going—Miss Sheppard wouldn’t have approved and Crook had other fish to fry, and—as he’d have said—was the fat sizzling?

It was seven weeks since she had left Mortcomb when she came back to it.

She got a slow train to High Benton, with a long wait for a connection at Baldersby End. It was a lovely spring day, clouds like alabaster on a blue china sky and the birds singing fit to bust themselves. She walked up to the village from the station—a couple of miles—but she didn’t want to advertise her visit by hiring a car. Besides, where could she tell a driver to take her? She stopped at Mrs. Baird’s house and found the door shut, and the windows closed. There were some little plants in pots on the inner window sill; she saw the earth in the pots was pale and hard and the edges of the leaves were browning. Her heart, that had been racing all the way, now beat so furiously it almost suffocated her. She was glad Mrs. Baird was a long time opening the door, because for a minute or two she knew herself incapable of speech.

Time ticked on. The little street was quite empty in the bright midday sun, not even a cat to be seen. She began to shiver in spite of the heat. There was a text that had frightened her as a child: Two women shall be working at the mill; one shall be taken and the other left. In the orphanage she had lain awake at night remembering that, had jumped up in bed with a start, fearful that the Last Day had caught her sleeping and that when she turned she would find all the other beds empty, the house deserted, the streets with no one in them, except perhaps some other human creature rejected at the Last Day.

She abandoned the knocker and began to rap sharply on the windowpane. As though this was a signal, a door across the street opened, a voice called, "If it's Mrs. Baird you want, she's gone to the hospital."

For an instant Margaret knew what it meant when people said "The world went dark." The sunlight, the little houses, the flowers on the other side of the glass, all disappeared from sight. She put out her hands as if the darkness were water and she could part it, like a swimmer forcing his way from the sea bottom to the light.

She knew what the woman meant, it was the crystallization of all her fears. In spite of the self-satisfied assurances of Miss Sheppard and Crook, Mr. Poulden had had his way. Patsy was going to die like the rest. No wonder he'd wanted to break the connection, had said she was being "well looked after." Once Patsy was out of the way, there'd be no one to make trouble.

"Except me," she thought, desperately, "except me."

"What's the matter? Don't you feel well? You shouldn't go walking in the sun."

The woman came out of her house and approached curiously. Then she recognized Margaret and her voice changed.

"Oh, it's you."

The girl found her voice at last. "What happened?" She was amazed to hear the words, wondering who had said them. It wasn't her voice, but there wasn't anyone else there. Someone playing a trick perhaps. The light came rushing back and the hot sun and everything was like a seesaw. Mrs. Baird's house tilted backwards and the flowers in the window spread like images in a distorting mirror.

"A car," amplified the woman. "These drivers. Getting on nicely, though."

Margaret began to focus again. "Which hospital?"

"Benton General, of course. 'Tisn't visiting day, though, and Sister's ever so strict."

"Still, a child . . ."

"Child?" Instant suspicion spread over her companion's face. "What's a child got to do with it?"

Margaret knew such a sense of relief she nearly fell over backwards.

"You mean, it's Mrs. Baird who was knocked down?"

"I keep telling you. What's the matter? Have you had your dinner?"

"No. No, of course not. It's the sun . . ."

"Must be daft coming out in the hot sun on an empty stomach. You go back and have something to eat. I'll tell Mrs. Baird you called, shall I?"

Margaret made a vague gesture that swept Mrs. Baird off the map. "It was Patsy really—she was staying here. Where is she now?"

Her companion gave an excellent imitation of Lot's wife being turned into a pillar of salt.

“Oh, her? She went away with Mr. Poulden. Hadn’t you heard? Mrs. Baird only obliged for a day or two. You’d better ask him, hadn’t you?”

“Yes. Yes, of course.” Margaret found herself walking up the road. She didn’t remember saying good-bye or thank you or leaving any message for the sick woman, but she supposed she had, because she’d been properly brought up. All she was aware of was intense irritation against Mrs. Thingummy for not making the position clear from the start. It wasn’t anything to her, Margaret, what happened to Mrs. Baird, who apart from Patsy had no concrete existence at all. She did wish, though, she’d asked about Tom. It would be the last straw if, having severed Patsy from her one human friend, he’d had Tom destroyed as well.

She reached the end of the village street and there was the druggist’s shop on its triangle of grass. She thought vaguely he’d smartened it up. Perhaps it was true, he was going to marry Miss Fowler and her money was paying for fresh paint and a new gate. The old one had swung rustily on its hinges for years, but Mr. Poulden always said it warned anyone in the shop that a customer was on the way. She pushed open the door. The shop smelled clean and strange. The young man behind the counter was clean and strange, too. When he saw her he hurried forward and pulled out a chair.

“Come on,” he invited, “and sit down. What is it? Walking in the sun? It’s not safe in this country, we don’t get it often enough, it catches us unawares.”

His voice was brisk and assured and even a little amused. He had bobbed back behind the counter and was mixing something in a little glass. When he pushed it across to her she shook her head.

“No—thank you.” Memory warned her of what had happened the last time someone mixed her a dose—in this very shop—and told her to drink it up. She’d gone to sleep and nearly met her death.

“Go on,” said the young man, a shade impatiently. “It’s not poison.”

“Why did you say that?”

“You looked as if you thought it was. What’s up? Had a shock?”

She looked around vaguely. “You’re new,” she said. “Where’s Mr. Poulden?”

“What?” His dismay was funny, really. “Did you come to see that old buzzard? Too bad. He’s gone, sold out, shot the moon—I don’t know. But this is Smart now, Smart late Poulden. A good name for a chemist, don’t you think?”

“You mean he’s gone?”

“That’s what I’m telling you.”

“And you bought the business?”

“If you can call it a business. Four walls kept together by a roof and that leaky. How he didn’t end in the bankruptcy courts beats me. Must have been the son of the original Rip Van Winkle.”

A voice called called from the parlor, "Eddie! It's after one."

"I know," Eddie replied, "but I've got a customer. Are you feeling better, miss?"

The "miss" stamped him for what he was. A bright, a too-bright city johnnie, Mr. Poulden would have called him, and for once she agreed.

"What's 1 o'clock got to do with it?" She didn't really want to know, but she couldn't go yet. There was something else she had to ask, when she could remember it.

"Close for the lunch hour," said Eddie Smart. "Druggists have to eat like anyone else, though Mr. P. didn't think so. Lean him up the wall and he'd look like a yard of lead piping. Two yards," he added, grinning at his own wit.

"What made you come here?" she asked. "It's a regular Sleepy Hollow."

"Won't be, now they're bringing the factory to the downs. Hadn't heard that? Well, you have to be up early in the morning to get the better of Eddie Smart. Yes, they're going to run up shacks and Nissen huts, arid where there are workmen there are wives, and where there are wives there are kids, and where there are kids there's work for the druggist. Besides, we've brightened things up a bit already. I bet you see the difference."

She looked around with lackluster eyes. "Where did Mr. Poulden go?"

"How do I know? One honeymoon in a lifetime's enough for me."

Really, he thought, with some irritation, moving around the counter and pulling down the natty new blind to show they were closed. Half-wits, these local people, though at first sight the girl had seemed a bit fetching, or would be if she troubled to make up a bit. He wondered if this mightn't be an opportunity to make a cash sale. Casually he picked up a box of face powder.

"Anything in this line interest you?"

"No. Oh no." But her wits were coming back, she was taking up his time, his lunch was spoiling in the oven; but he mustn't go yet, there was something she had to know. She looked around desperately. A fancy case of soap caught her eye, soap for children, soap shaped like Mickey Mouse and a dachshund dog and a polar bear.

"Have you got one shaped like a cat?" she asked.

He brightened a little. "Can do."

"Talking of honeymoons," she said, watching him pull open a drawer, "did you mean Mr. Poulden had got married?"

"That's right. Surprised? If you ask me I believe if you were to put a bowler hat and a muffler on a beanpole, some woman would make an offer."

He produced two miniature soap cats.

"I'll take the pair," offered Margaret, opening her bag. "Has he left the neighborhood? Well, I suppose so, if he's sold the shop."

"Said there wasn't enough trade for him." The druggist wrapped up the

cats and applied sealing wax to either side of the little parcel.

"Whom did he marry?" asked Margaret, offering a ten-shilling note.

"Got a penny?" he inquired. "Oh, all right. I can do it. Oh, I couldn't say, I'm sure. Nine bob change. Right. O.K., Doreen. I'm coming. Sure you won't take the pick-me-up? You should. It wouldn't hurt a kitten."

"Or help it much," he might have added. Margaret shook her head.

"But I'll pay for it, since you mixed it for me." She put a shilling on the counter. "What happened to the little girl?"

"Little girl? Got it wrong, haven't you? Mr. P. didn't have any little girl."

"There was a little girl living here not a month ago. Patsy. You must remember."

"I would if there'd been one."

"But you must have seen her room, when you went over the house, I mean," Margaret insisted.

"I tell you there was no kid here, and no sign of one. Well, I ask you, what would an old boy like that do with a kid on a honeymoon?"

"Did he ever say where she had gone?"

"No," said Mr. Smart distinctly, "he never mentioned her, because there wasn't one. And there wasn't any room here that looked as though a kid had been in it. Now, miss, if you're quite ready . . ."

She rose and walked out into the hot sunlight. Mr. Smart was at her heels. He almost caught a fold of her dress in the door as he closed it sharply, and she heard the lock released.

A car was coming along the road, a neat green car with a man at the wheel. It slowed as it approached her. A door opened.

"Hullo," said Dr. Lamb, "returning to the scene of the crime? Here, I say, hold up, you can't go fainting all over the King's Highway, though I must say, if you have to, it shows a constructive mind to collapse halfway between a doctor and a pharmacy."

She didn't remember getting into the car, but she must have, because a minute or so later she was sitting beside him, and the car was driving away into the country.

"What were you doing at the druggist's?" demanded Dr. Lamb, suspiciously.

She opened the little parcel on her lap and showed him the soap cats.

"They look innocuous enough."

"They're for Patsy, il only I can find her. Dr. Lamb, do you know where she is? There's a sort of conspiracy to pretend she never existed."

"Who says she never existed?"

"That man—Mr. Smart."

"The new druggist? Oh, I dare say he never knew. She'd vanished from the scene by the time he appeared. It was a rush job, you know." He pulled up the car in a pleasant lane. "How about lunch—or have you had yours?"

"Not yet. It doesn't matter. But—I'm keeping you."

"This happens to be my half day. Funny how the laity never expect doctors to have time off." He produced an enormous packet of sandwiches and some fruit. Looks as though I thought I was going to run into you, doesn't it? My housekeeper labors under the delusion that I'm hall-starved. Now relax for fifteen minutes, if you can, and we'll do the talking alterwards."

He wound down the windows of the car and the lovely spring air came in. She looked about her, seeing her surroundings for the first time. A peewit flew past and, alighting, went bouncing down the lane as jubilant and abandoned as a ballet dancer, the sun gleaming on his radiant black and white wings. Up from the pond scurried a moorhen.

"They always remind me of chaps at a convention," said her companion, smiling. "Look, head poking forward, hands behind back—no, I know they haven't got hands, but that's the impression."

She looked and, smiling in her turn, admitted that it was. The sandwiches were good and reviving. When they were finished Lamb crumpled up the paper wrappings and said, "Yes, about Poulden. He seemed to make up his mind in a tremendous hurry to get out. Not that I blame him, there was altogether too much talk. First his wife—well, I dare say that could happen to any man, though if we're to be perfectly candid"—he shot her a golden sideways glance—"there were those who wondered if Miss B. was quite as bereaved as she appeared. Then you came and the tempo quickened. You can never tell with these lugubrious chaps how they're going to be affected by youth and novelty. He'd been running along on a single track with Mrs. P. for years, and when she ran off the lines, so to speak . . ."

"Or was run off them." Margaret was astounded to hear her own voice. For an instant there was silence. Dr. Lamb produced a cigarette case and thoughtfully tapped a Players on the back of it.

"Who put that idea into your head? You weren't here at the time, were you?"

"Of course not. Only—if she meant to marry Mr. Poulden . . ."

"Who said she did?"

"It was someone in London—there was that letter to the lawyer that she was so queer and secretive about. And he came down at once. And if there was nothing special in it, why did they keep it out of court? And there's another thing. Patsy heard Miss Bannerman talking to Mr. Poulden that evening, when he said she was beyond speech, and she said something about terms—or he said he couldn't meet them—I'm not quite sure of the actual words. And—you remember, Dr. Lamb, she died the same night, before she could say a word to anyone else."

"So she did. And then," he added, lighting the cigarette at last, "there was your little suicide attempt."

"Do you really think I would do a thing like that with Patsy in the house?" she demanded, fiercely.

"I don't believe you would," he agreed. "You must admit the stars in their courses are fighting against Poulden, if all this rigmarole we're patching up is true. You do have to hand it to Brother Poulden, he is a trier. Mrs. P. and Miss B. and you . . ."

"And Patsy?" she whispered. "Will she be next?"

"No," said Dr. Lamb, decisively. "Stop looking like Death's first cousin. The little girl will be all right."

She said, with a slow shiver, oblivious to the waving grass, the caroling birds, the bright and dancing air, "I wonder. Something seems to happen to everyone connected with Mr. Poulden. If things were aboveboard, why shouldn't he let me know where she is?"

"Now come," said Dr. Lamb kindly, "you can answer that for yourself. He doesn't want you to know, because you've got a tongue in your head, and women are logical creatures who think there's no sense having tongues if they don't use them. . . . You know, your best plan might be to let things ride. If you stay out of the picture, he'll likely let the little girl alone. . . ."

Margaret laughed abruptly. "Another one," she said. "You all give me the same advice, except Elsie. You and Miss Sheppard and Mr. Crook. . . ."

"Crook?" His face brightened. "Not Arthur G. of London, S.W.5? Is that old walrus still on the warpath? That changes everything. Know who I'm sorry for now? Mr. Edwin Poulden. He can be like those chaps in Revelation who cried on the rocks to fall down and cover them—it won't do him a mite of good. Crook 'ull come popping along at any minute with a charge of dynamite to blast the rocks, and personally if it's a choice between Crook and a landslide I'd choose the landslide."

"You won't have to choose," said Margaret, politely. "Mr. Crook feels as you do, it's nothing to do with me."

"Well, my dear, face it, he's right. You're no relation."

She stared. "What's that got to do with it? I'm all Patsy has."

She felt his hand close over hers. "Take it easy, Margaret Reeve. We're none of us indispensable, though I've never yet met a woman who'd believe that. Now tell me, where are you living now?"

She gave him her address in Calcutt Street. Her heart was racing and not only on Patsy's account.

"I'll be coming up to London soon—a few days' holiday due me, so don't move till you hear from me again. And be good to yourself, look where you're going, don't cross with the traffic lights against you. I don't want to hear you've fallen under a bus or something."

Afterwards he wondered what had inspired that silly crack. "Oh, my prophetic soul, my uncle," Crook was to retort. "Funny how half the best things are said in jest."

Margaret returned to London feeling that at last she had an ally, which was irrational of her, perhaps, seeing that Dr. Lamb had made it clear he agreed with all the other appeasers where Patsy was concerned. Yet so it was. He had said he would come and see her, he told her to take care of herself, and he had said he didn't believe she had tried to commit suicide, in spite of the evidence to that effect. Not that she had abandoned an iota of her determination to discover where Mr. Poulden had hidden the little girl. Crook and Sheppard and Lamb—for the first time the odd incidence of the names struck her—might all warn her she was trespassing on dangerous ground, but they only saw the situation, as it were, from the outside. She had been inside the room.

On her next free day she went to the hospital at High Benton to see Mrs. Baird.

"I'm sorry about your accident," she said. "Do you know where Patsy is?"

"You want to forget Patsy."

"What a silly thing to say. Where is she, Mrs. Baird? Surely Mr. Poulden told you. He couldn't be wicked enough to cut her off from everyone she knows, a little girl like that."

"I can't tell you where she is, because I don't know. But if I did . . ."

"If you did you'd tell me if I had to choke it out of you," said Margaret, calmly. "Think, please. Didn't Mr. Poulden give you any hint? Didn't you write out a label or . . ."

"He said he was sending her to the country where she'd make new friends and be happy. That's all I know, Miss Reeve, and that's the truth."

"Oh, nonsense," said Margaret, "of course you know more than that. And I mean to find out the rest, if I have to pull down the walls of the hospital. When Mr. Poulden took her away, did he come in a car?"

"Mr. Poulden in a car? Whatever next? No, he said they'd catch the bus, the 11:34 it was."

"Into High Benton."

"Yes. He said that would give them nice time."

"Nice time for what?"

"To catch the train, of course."

"Which train?"

"However should I know? He said the bus got in at 11:48—it stops at the Cross Roads, you see—and it all fitted nicely."

"So all I have to do is find a train leaving High Benton about midday. Thank you, Mrs. Baird."

"I haven't told you anything, mind," said the woman, looking a little

feverish. "I promised Mr. Poulden I wouldn't say a word."

"And perhaps if you saw him walking along the edge of a cliff with Patsy, putting out his hands to push her over, you wouldn't say anything either. You may not understand it, Mrs. Baird, but Patsy's in danger. Just as Miss Bannerman was—and myself . . ."

"If you find her . . ."

"If I don't I shall go to the police. Yes, of course, I can. Attempted murder's a crime."

She walked out "as mad as a March hare," whispered Mrs. Baird, more excited by her than at any previous time. Who'd have thought she had it in her, that mouse of a girl, so soft and gentle, so devoted to Patsy? And murder! Well, say what you like, there was always something new turning up. She honestly couldn't understand how anyone could ever be bored.

Margaret looked at her watch and saw that she could catch the 4:05 into High Benton. The stationmaster there would remember Patsy; the pair of them had spent long afternoons at the station watching the trains go through. For so small a junction there were a surprising number, and Patsy always wanted to know where they were going. She and Mr. Perrott would carry on conversations about railway lines—he'd started as a porter and had been around a lot. "Of course," thought Margaret, "why didn't that occur to me before? If Mr. Poulden took Patsy by train, Mr. Perrott's the person who'll remember where they went."

Mr. Perrott recognized Margaret at once. "Seems strange to see you without the little girl," he said.

"I'm going to see her," promised Margaret.

"Not tonight. You'll get no connection so late as this. Your one chance 'ud be to go to Castle Wenham and catch the early morning train to Finchford. Cross-country journey, see? It's quicker, though you won't get folk like Mr. Poulden to believe it, to go up to London and get the direct line from Charing Cross."

"Patsy went from here, though."

"That's right. On the 12:03."

"Would she have to change?"

"Castle Wenham same as you. Half an hour to wait. It's a long time for a little girl traveling alone."

"You mean he sent her by herself?" Margaret was horrified.

"I thought that, too," agreed Mr. Perrott, "but he said he'd arrange with the guard that she got out at the right place, and I rung the chap at Castle Wenham to look out for her and see she got on the right train. He did, too. Bert's a right good chap. Him and me saw a lot of each other when we were youngsters. He bought her a bun and put her in charge of a very nice lady, he said, and she was being met at Finchford. And that was all right, too," he added, "because Bert rung through on his own account and a lady came for her in a station wagon."

“Did she seem—ill?”

“Not so much ill as—lost if you get me. Never saw such a change in anyone. I remember the way she was— bright as a beam always, but the sun was in that day all right.”

Margaret thought if she could have pressed a button and precipitated Mr. Poulden into the pit of fire and brimstone prepared for the lost, she wouldn't have hesitated.

“You'd have thought a little girl like that wouldn't have been too much trouble for a new wife,” Mr. Perrott continued, “seeing she's no young girl and you couldn't stay.”

“That wasn't my choice,” Margaret assured him, wondering how much he knew about the attempted suicide. There had been nothing in the papers, but in the country everything gets about. “Mr. Poulden said he wanted to make different arrangements. I wanted her to come to London. .

“Well.” Mr. Perrott looked doubtful. “London's no place for children, I've always said.”

“I don't believe where they are matters so much to children,” exclaimed Margaret passionately, “as who they're with, if they feel safe. Patsy had been uprooted too often. She was just settling again. Did she—say anything?”

“Not much. ‘Cat got your tongue?’ I asked her.”

“Did she have the cat?” Margaret interrupted.

“That's right. Carried it in a little basket. ‘Don't let him be a worry to Mrs. Terry,’ Mr. Poulden told her.”

“Mrs. Terry?”

“Well, some name like that. I don't hear quite so well as I used. ‘It's very kind of her to let you have him. Children's homes don't let you take pets as a rule.’ It was then she said the thing I remember. ‘It's not my fault I'm an orphan,’ she told him.”

Margaret felt the furious tears spring to her eyes. “What did Mr. Poulden say to that?”

“He said she mustn't think of herself that way. She'd find a lot of brothers and sisters waiting for her at the house, and this Mrs.—whatever her name was—would be a mother to her. She just looked at him and then she said, ‘I don't want another mother.’ And then the train come in and he put her aboard, and said to a lady traveling in the carriage that she was to get out at Castle Wenham for Finchford. You going back to London tonight?”

“I have to. I only got a half day this time. I caught the 12:46. But I'll be down again soon.”

“Best let them know you're coming,” suggested Mr. Perrott innocently. “Then you can take the little lass out to lunch.”

“Yes,” agreed Margaret, suddenly transported into the past. At the

orphanage where she had grown up, it was the height of every child's ambition to go out with someone unconnected with the Home and be given a meal in a restaurant. Dinner in a restaurant. How the phrase slipped back into memory—the wistfulness of the unprivileged and the pride of the fortunate. To her horror she found the tears were beginning to fall. Luckily at that moment her train was signaled, and she dived into an empty carriage.

Mrs. Derry—not Terry, after all—was a hard-working middle-aged woman to whom a fearful thing had happened a few years before. A four-year-old child for whom she was responsible was shut into a dark cupboard by an unimaginative nursemaid on one of the rare afternoons when Mrs. Derry was off duty. Her assistant, most unfortunately, received a telegram calling her to a deathbed shortly after Mrs. Derry's departure, leaving only a seventeen-year-old girl in charge. The boy in question, a sensitive, tiresome little creature, was so troublesome that, to frighten him a little, this girl put him into what was known as Tommy Dodd's cupboard, actually a luggage hole under the roof. She only intended to keep him there, say, ten minutes, and she ran across the road to mail a letter before releasing him. By the farther curb a truck knocked her down and she was carried off to the hospital unconscious. She was pretty new to the Home and no one recognized her. The children, at first entertained by their strange liberty, presently became frightened. When Mrs. Derry returned she found several of them in tears, the playroom a shambles, and no tea served or gas lit. Of Amy there was no sign at all. Alarmed, she questioned the children. Amy had been seen to go out carrying a letter; no one had seen her return. They had had no tea. That was the main cause of their distress. Mrs. Derry set about repairing the neglect. It was only when they were all around the table that she noticed the absence of the child, Roy. The other children, who liked Amy (a tough girl who didn't believe any child could be afraid in the dark in his own house) said nothing. "Amy must have told you . . ." "She said he was in bed, we wasn't to go up." Well, of course, Roy wasn't in bed, he wasn't in the garden or the outhouse or the lavatory or the spare room Mrs. Derry kept for an occasional visitor. She trembled, fearing he might somehow have got out onto the roof. She even thought he might have run away, but none of his toys was missing and he was an unnaturally possessive child. When she was half-crazed one little girl whispered timidly that he might be in the cupboard. Mrs. Derry was so horrified her legs almost gave way under her. She tottered and sprawled up the stairs and opened the cupboard door. But even before she could see anything she knew what she was going to find. Roy had been fastened in for several hours alone, the place was suffocating, there was no ventilation and he was terrified of the dark. Mrs. Derry tried to deny the facts, she worked madly to bring breath through the blue lips, but it was

no good. At the inquest she heard herself described as a kindly woman whom it was hard to blame, but she should have realized what was going on (it turned out that some of the other children had been similarly incarcerated and nobody seemed a penny the worse). The coroner added that she couldn't guess about the telegram coming for her assistant — whom some people unfairly held responsible for the tragedy—and she supposed she had made adequate arrangements. The verdict was death by misadventure. The person Mrs. Derry envied was Amy who was still unconscious and might never recover; or, even if she did, not remember the past. At all events, it was the end of St. Monica's Home, and for twelve months Mrs. Derry lived on her own fat, as they say. Then she shifted across three counties and opened another orphanage, licensed by the local authority who knew the facts. For another twelve months she was on pins and needles lest she be recognized and her work once more razed to the ground. But time passed and the orphanage flourished in a Spartan sort of way, she couldn't save much but her health was good, and she began to put the past out of mind. But old sins have long shadows, and the shadow's name was Edwin Poulden.

Edwin had heard of Mrs. Derry through his fondness for the criminal columns of the press. He used to cut out and paste up any item about an unexplained death or a tragedy like that which had befallen Mrs. Derry. *Tombstone Serenade* Crook called the book when he heard about it; and Mrs. Derry had gone into it. A useful woman for an emergency, Mr. Poulden, always far-sighted and economical, had decided. And now the emergency had arisen.

He explained his situation in a very pleasant, gentlemanly manner—a widower with a small ward, a legacy from his wife—her sole legacy, he added, by way of a sedate joke—proposing to marry again in the near future and the lady in question not feeling able to start her new life with a nursery whose fledgling was an outsider in any case. So “I feel, we both feel, it will be best for Patsy to come into the family life of such a household as yours. Since my dear wife's death I have experimented with a — well, a nursery governess, I suppose you would call her— but it hasn't proved successful. Miss Reeve was a very jealous and possessive young woman, inclined to hysteria. She had a definitely bad effect on the child, and when I told her I proposed to make a change and release her to her previous work in London, she—I tell you this in confidence—she attempted to put an end to herself. Naturally, it was most upsetting for the child—unfortunately it was impossible to keep the facts from her—and I want her to forget all about it as early as possible. So I am going to ask you a favor. If this girl should discover Patsy's whereabouts, I'd be obliged if you would say you know nothing of her. It's for the child's sake,” he added quickly. “One can't be too careful where the little ones are concerned. I've

exercised my mind a lot as to the best plan for her, but I feel she'll settle here, be well looked after, and have allowances made, if need be." And then, his round, bulging brown eyes full on her face, he said it. "No shutting up in black cupboards or anything barbarous like that."

Mrs. Derry thought she was going to faint. It had come after nearly five years' immunity. How he knew the story she'd no idea, and anyway it didn't matter. He was letting her know he did know it, and if she didn't meet his terms the whole neighborhood would share that knowledge. He didn't need to say another word to convince her of that. She wondered where the truth lay. Had he made advances to this Miss Reeve and been repulsed? Had he gone further and got her into trouble?

Mr. Poulden was standing up. "I know I can rely on you. The terms you mentioned are perfectly satisfactory. I think it best for Patsy to regard this as her home for the present—changing is so bad for children and my own plans are a little unsettled. Oh, and one other thing."

"Wait for it," thought Mrs. Derry, clenching her hands under the edge of the desk.

"Patsy has a pet, a black cat, a very clean, quiet little thing, to which she's devoted."

Mrs. Derry said through dry lips, "I've had to draw the line at pets. The children are as much as I can manage."

"I'm sure," sympathized Edwin. "Still, this is rather an unusual case. Patsy lost my wife who was like a mother to her, then we had this rather unsatisfactory interregnum—my fault, perhaps, for engaging anyone so young but she was a connection of my wife and brought an excellent reference—and her devotion to Miss Reeve is extravagant, and to my mind not quite healthy. I feel, though, it might be unwise to separate her from everything familiar, and I can assure you the cat, which is quite a small one, will give no trouble. I'll send her over next week, since you have a vacancy, and no doubt you can arrange to meet whatever train is most convenient."

He had bowed himself out, still smiling, but after he'd gone Mrs. Derry sat back remembering people who shook hands while wearing poisoned rings or thrust daggers into the backs of unsuspecting guests. Ill birds come home to roost and here was hers, flying in with a flap of wings that almost blinded her.

The child was undeniably attractive, if abnormally quiet; Mrs. Derry was prepared to make her feel at home so far as this could be done without making the other orphans jealous. She had three times as much conscience as Miss Sheppard's Elsie, and it wasn't fair that the children respected rather than loved her. None of the London kids dreamed of respecting Elsie, but they'd have howled like dervishes to know she was leaving them.

Patsy didn't get on very well with the others, either. "You should show

more spirit," Mrs. Derry counseled her. But spirit was what Patsy hadn't got; she mooched about with Tom, only coming out of a mood to ask when Margaret was coming. Mrs. Derry said Margaret couldn't come, she'd got a job in London. "She'd write," said Patsy.

"Perhaps she can't."

"Oh, is she dead, too?" asked Patsy in a voice that made the woman jump. She'd never heard anything like it in a young child. Still, these were early days and at least Patsy didn't fret for Mr. Poulden.

When the garden gate clicked on that gray spring morning, Mrs. Derry cautiously parted the curtains and peered out. A young girl was coming up the path. Mrs. Derry knew at once what she wanted. Been in trouble, had a baby, been persuaded to keep it and now found it was a nuisance, or she wanted to get married and the man wouldn't take the child. Or, more likely still didn't realize there was one. And somehow she'd heard of Mrs. Derry and thought she might farm it out here. That was simple, because Mrs. Derry didn't take infants. She hadn't the staff. Most of her children were school age and she'd had the wit to buy a house in a neighborhood where there was an excellent nursery school for the infants. The girl rang the bell, and Mrs. Derry heard her invaluable middle-aged helper, Ivy, open the door.

"I want to see the matron, please," said a clear, young voice.

"Have you an appointment?"

"No." (No apology, no explanation, just the bare negative.)

"I'm afraid Mrs. Derry's not available."

"Then I'll wait till she is. It's all right, I've got all day."

"Is it about a child?"

"Yes. Patsy. Patsy Warren. I want to see her."

Mrs. Derry, who'd been listening, pulled her door wide and went into the hall.

"Were you asking for me?"

"If you're the matron. I've come about Patsy Warren."

Mrs. Derry pulled her into her own room. It was a Saturday when the children weren't at school. Luckily, it being a damp sort of day, they were upstairs, out of earshot of the hall. Still, no sense taking chances.

"A little girl called Patsy Warren?" she repeated. "But you don't look twenty-one to me, and I'm not allowed to do business with minors. Is she a relation? I don't think you mentioned your name."

"My name's Margaret Reeve. Patsy . . ."

"Who sent you here, Miss Reeve?"

"No one. I thought I'd explained. I came because of Patsy. ..."

"I asked because there's some mistake. There's no one here called Patty Warren."

"Patsy," murmured Margaret, automatically. "What happened? Didn't

she stay? Or . . . did something happen to her, too?"

Mrs. Derry's speckled eyebrows shot up. "I don't know what you're talking about, Miss Reeve. And I'm sorry you've had your journey for nothing. . . ."

"How long did she stay?"

"I know nothing of her. You must have come to the wrong address."

Margaret opened her bag and took out the photograph Mr. Poulden had sent her when he first asked her to come to Mortcomb. Mrs. Derry's breath became a shade more hurried. She'd seen the facsimile of that picture, in Mr. Poulden's hand.

"This is Patsy."

"Miss Reeve, I keep telling you, I know nothing about her." In her heart she began to feel a pang of sympathy for Edwin. Jealous, he'd said. Possessive, he'd said. A fanatic, he might have added. For all her air of deceptive fragility Mrs. Derry believed the girl capable of tearing the bricks apart to look for her beloved child.

"I can only repeat there is nothing I can do to help you. Is the child a relative?" she added.

"No. But that won't make any difference, you'll find. It's not that I want to take her away. How could I? I'm not even of age, as you've just reminded me, but I must know that she's well—and safe."

Oh, not a doubt about it, mad as a hatter. Lucky for Edwin Poulden she hadn't gone for him with a pair of scissors. She looked capable of it.

Mrs. Derry rose. "I'm sorry you've had your journey for nothing."

"Ah, but I haven't," said Margaret, rising also. "I came to see if Patsy was here and was safe, and now I know she isn't—safe, I mean. I'll leave you my address in case you suddenly remember she is here after all." She laid a slip of paper on the table. "You could get me on the telephone—it's written there—if Patsy was taken ill, say, and wanted me."

Mrs. Derry led the way into the hall. Margaret followed slowly, looking about her, hopeful of an eleventh hour miracle, the sight of a familiar face, the sound of a well-loved voice, even a step she couldn't fail to recognize though she herself lay in the grave. But the house was silent and august. The tall staircase stretched up to a landing with colored glass panes in the high window; bannisters safeguarded the young, there was a homely Indian hair rug over the stair carpet. On either side of the front door hung huge old-fashioned prints in maple frames—Twixt Love and Duty and The Day of Reckoning. She stared unseeing at the cutaway coats and tall hats of the men, the flowing skirts and feathered bonnet of the heroine. Then Mrs. Derry opened the door and she walked out.

It had rained during the morning and trees and bushes glistened in the repentant early afternoon sunlight. As she reached the great lilac bush by the gate, the branches suddenly swayed violently and a shower of drops shook over her face. She looked up, wondering, since there was no wind,

and found herself looking into a pair of topaz eyes, bright as fine gold, set in a mask of black velvet. She stood perfectly still, feeling that any movement would make her faint. The reaction was too tremendous for sound. Then her voice came back to her in a whisper.

“Tom!” she whispered. “Tom!”

She put a hand through the leaves and the little black head ducked in the familiar fashion, rubbing against her palm. A happy, rumbling sound agitated the spruce white whiskers.

“Tom!” she said again.

Now she knew not only that Patsy had been here, but that she was here still. Otherwise Tom wouldn’t be on the premises. She turned and sent a beseeching look to the front windows, but they were all blank. That was natural enough. The children slept at the back of the house, where they wouldn’t be disturbed by passing cars or the sound of voices on the road.

“If only you could speak,” she whispered in an agony. “If you could just tell Patsy I haven’t forgotten.” Because Mrs. Derry (and Miss Sheppard and Mr. Crook and even cynical young Doctor Lamb) could all declare that children forgot and it was kinder to let the past remain a closed book, but Margaret knew Patsy wasn’t like that. She’d know all the pangs of the deserted, the abandoned, the forlorn. “If I could leave a sign . . .” and then the idea came to her. In the lapel of her coat she wore a little gilt brooch, shaped like a ship. Miss Sheppard had given it to her one Christmas, and she and Patsy had come to regard it as a symbol of the ship in which one day they’d sail round the world.

“Right around the world, Margaret?” the child insisted.

“Right around the world.”

“With Tom?”

“Of course.”

With shaking hands she unfastened the brooch. Tom wore a little green collar. Cousin Alice had given it to him so that if he strayed people would know where he came from. As he grew bigger, the collar span had to be lengthened, which meant there were several empty holes. She threaded the pin of the brooch through two adjacent holes and fastened it. It was a sturdy clasp, it wouldn’t easily come undone, and Patsy couldn’t miss it. “I shall come back,” she promised. “I shall come back.” She opened the gate, and began to walk toward the bus stop at just the moment that Mrs. Derry, closing the door of her sitting room, took paper and pen and settled down to write to Mr. Poulden.

On her return Margaret wrote to Dr. Lamb. “I have discovered where Patsy is. The address is The Grey House, Finchford. Mrs. Derry, who is the matron or owner, pretends she has never heard of her, but Tom is there and knew me at once. Tom is the cat who was supposed to have frightened Miss Bannerman to death, but Mr. Crook doesn’t believe that story. I am sending you this letter because accidents can happen to anyone, as I

should know, and somebody besides Mr. and Mrs. Poulden should have the information.”

She reread the letter, underlined “accidents can happen to anyone” and carried the envelope down to the box.

In the furnished house they had rented at Leysmith Mr. and Mrs. Poulden were at breakfast. Edwin was on the point of buying a promising little business in a neighborhood that, he thought, should be good for his profession. An excellent climate, a long season, well-to-do residents—to say nothing of the summer tourists who were always getting into trouble of some kind and rushing to the druggist for assistance. The affair was in its last stages and he was expecting a letter from the outgoing proprietor this morning. The letter he held in his hand, however, had nothing to do with this business.

“Trouble, dearest?” asked Beryl Poulden. Well she knew it was trouble, before he opened his mouth or so much as lifted his eyes. There were no secrets between these two; each could answer the other’s thought. For Beryl the miracle, if you can call it that, took place at their first meeting. She had gone casually into the pharmacy for a roll of lint and there was Edwin behind the counter. Edwin? Her other self, the meaning of life and all its disappointments. She was past thirty, worn with looking after a selfish and dictatorial old man. Now she was just out of her mourning and wondering what to do with a life that his passing had left remarkably empty. All her capacity for emotion, which was great and had been dammed up (since existence with the late Mr. Fowler had precluded any intimacies with persons of either sex—most people would have preferred to encounter a rogue elephant than the dear departed), burst like rushing water to overwhelm everything in its path. For that was the real miracle—not that she, starved, repressed, more than half dead to hope, should suddenly break her bounds, but that Edwin, the cold-hearted, the careful, should be similarly affected.

Until his meeting with this dark, passionate woman (no beauty, you’d have said, but to him she instantly represented all the beauty of the world), he had been if not a devoted at all events an adequate and faithful husband. Alice was not the type to call out the knight-errantry in a man. Five years her husband’s senior, she had been thirty at the time of the marriage, to which she brought a nice little nest egg. Without it—and of this she was aware—the match might never have been made, but she, swept off her feet precisely as Beryl had been, could find nothing else half so good in the way of an investment. And for sixteen years they had got along very pleasantly. He hadn’t given her any trouble in a wife’s meaning of the word, and if he was careful she wasn’t of an extravagant nature herself. The coming of Patsy had given her an outlet for feelings whose expression he hadn’t wanted, so all in all it had been a satisfactory enough marriage.

And then Beryl appeared on the horizon with the force of a tidal wave.

Instantly the cautious Edwin had flung discretion to the winds. His various excuses—that he must take such and such an order to Lady Hall in person, for example—were tranquilly accepted by Alice, whose main interest in life was now the child. And Miss Banner-man, for all her toadlike appearance, was company. Beryl, womanlike, appreciated none of the difficulties of the situation. “You must get a divorce,” she urged. “I have enough money for two.” But Edwin knew Alice would never give him a divorce, not even if he left her and went to live openly with Beryl, which naturally was out of the question. No, so long as she lived, she’d stand in their way, like a locked gate between him and the house he yearned to inhabit. So long as she lived. The phrase, having once been uttered (to Beryl, naturally) haunted his mind.

The thought of abandoning this late love occurred to neither. It intensified with the days till it was a wonder the whole village didn’t understand what was going on. But outwardly Edwin remained so correct, his meetings were so well-timed, and his marriage had been accepted for so long, his household, with its elderly boarder and its innocent child, so firmly rooted in respectability, that even the gossips made little headway. No one ever knew how much Alice realized. And soon to the lovers she had become no more than a stone in the path of a racing motorist. Obviously the stone must be removed from his path, and so it was with Alice. Soon the only question that remained was how and when.

Neither of the lovers paid any attention to Miss Bannerman. She didn’t get about much, thought herself a cut above the villagers. “It’s the little things that matter, don’t you see?” Crook used to say, and it was the little things, in his experience, that brought most men to the gallows. And in Edwin and Beryl’s estimation Miss Bannerman was one of the little things.

The mushrooms had been a heaven-sent opportunity—neither of them would have seen any blasphemy in that thought. There they were, waiting to be served, when Patsy began to cry with toothache; up went Alice, into the dispensary went Edwin, and when he came back the kitchen was empty, Miss Bannerman having handily gone to set the table. How easy, how pitifully easy, to sprinkle a little powdered death on one helping, to act the butler and carry in the dishes, setting the fatal one in Alice’s place. Alice was accustomed to bilious attacks, no reason why she should think this one different from all the rest. After that it had been simple. Grieve was an incompetent old fool, mumbled about her age and prescribed sovereign remedies; he wouldn’t notice how she didn’t react to anything. A more on-the-spot man, like that pushing Dr. Lamb, might have smelled a rat, but if old Grieve had a rat in his pocket he wouldn’t be aware of it. All this time Edwin had no sense of guilt. For him no one existed except Beryl, and any action was justified for her sake. The notion that Miss Bannerman might suspect the truth never passed through his mind. When she said she wanted to stay on he was mildly exasperated, but, after all, he couldn’t

announce his engagement right away. When she told him her terms, making it perfectly clear that she knew just what had happened, he had been shocked to death. But never in any doubt as to the outcome. By this time he was crazy enough to consider that by opposing him she was actually committing suicide. (Crook might have agreed with him, but no judge would.) The visiting cat, met with on the doorstep, was an inspiration, just as Crook had supposed. But if it hadn't been there, he'd have found some other way out.

And then, when at last the tide seemed setting in his favor and he could breathe again, he was confronted by the child, the waif and stray, the foundling, whose few words, uttered casually to Margaret without a notion of their import, could even now blow them all sky-high. Because if it ever became known that Miss Bannerman hadn't been sinking that night, that she'd uttered threats and he hadn't been able to meet them, people—Mr. Holland for one—would begin doing mental arithmetic. Of course, he'd say, there must have been something in the nature of a hold over the fellow, the fellow being himself. Then he'd start wondering what kind of a hold that could be and it wouldn't be long before he'd suspect the truth. And being a nosey parker sort of chap, the odds were he'd think it his duty to his late client to push matters a bit farther. True, the Home Secretary didn't like signing exhumation orders, but once the police came butting in there was no knowing where matters would end, though Mr. Poulden could make a good guess.

This way to the gallows tree.

Clearly, then, he must do everything in his power to stop Patsy talking, because children are unreliable, foreigners to discretion. It wouldn't matter, he reflected, if she talked to Mrs. Derry, because she had her own reasons for not wanting trouble; but Margaret Reeve was a different matter. She was the sort of witness juries like; you only had to see her effect on that dour fellow. Dr. Lamb. He, Edwin, had done his best to shut Margaret's mouth. Too bad that hadn't worked. When that failed he'd done the next best and separated her from the child. But that effort, too, had failed in its purpose. He'd never heard Crook's analogy of murder with the House That Jack Built, but he would have accepted it as gospel. Having got so far he couldn't stop. So now, in answer to Beryl's question (question? statement rather) he said, "Margaret Reeve has discovered Patsy's whereabouts. This letter is from Mrs. Derry. . . ."

"What does she tell you?"

"That she denied all knowledge of the child, as I instructed her, but in some way Margaret contrived to leave a message—Mrs. Derry speaks of a brooch that the child picked up she's not sure where. Patsy is convinced Margaret came to see her, and is making the situation intolerable."

"Patsy had better be removed at once," said Beryl.

"That will only postpone the evil day. This girl is a fanatic. Wherever

we put the child she'll find her. Yes, she'd even dig up a grave."

Across the table he met her resolute eyes; the same thought was in both their minds.

"The little fool!" said Beryl. "Does she really think she can defeat us now?"

"Yes," said Edwin simply, "I told you she was a fanatic."

"And you're certain of the importance of this—that the girl really can harm you?"

"Between them," replied Edwin clearly, "they could put a rope around my neck."

For Beryl the room blacked out. For an instant it was really as if she stood on the edge of a grave, the sort that has no name, only a number on a flagstone.

"Then we've no choice," she told him when she could speak again. "The girl must be silenced." Even she did not propose violence to a child.

Presently, having evolved a plan, she observed, "I really believe, Edwin, it would be best for Margaret Reeve to be told the truth, that Patsy is at Finchford, I mean."

"She knows it already."

"I mean, let Mrs. Derry admit it."

"You know what'll happen. She'll drop everything and go down there."

"Yes. I supposed that. But we can't help ourselves now. Things have gone so far. I'm sure it's the only solution to our problem. And to preserve what we have no price would be too heavy to pay."

The telephone in Calcutt Street stood in the hall. On that dripping Tuesday evening it was Mrs. Shaw who answered it. A voice—extremely agitated she said afterwards—asked for Miss Reeve.

"A country call, very urgent."

"I'll see if she's in," said Mrs. Shaw, toiling slowly up the stairs.

"The country?" Margaret came flying down. The country could mean only one thing—Patsy. And of course it did.

"Miss Reeve? Thank Heavens, I've got you. This is Mrs. Derry. It's Patsy."

"What's happened?" Margaret's voice was harsh.

"Listen. Did you send her a box of chocolates?"

Margaret's heart began to quake like a television screen when a plane goes over.

"No."

"You're sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. You'd told me she wasn't with you, so . . ."

"I know. I couldn't help it. It was Mr. Poulden. He said you weren't to know. Somehow you found out . . ."

"It was Tom. What's happened to Patsy?"

"She—she ate the chocolates. There was a card in them—from Margaret with love. She was so upset because she knew you'd been here and she'd missed you, so I thought Let her have the chocolates. I have to use my own judgment sometimes, don't I?"

"Go on," said Margaret, fiercely. "What's happened?"

"There must have been something wrong with them . . ." whispered the voice.

"What are you trying to tell me? Is she . . . ?"

"She's bad, very bad. The doctor—I got the doctor at once—he's taken the rest of the chocolates for analysis. Patsy keeps calling for you, we can't quiet her. Can you come down? Tonight? This is a dreadful thing for me."

"It's worse for Patsy."

"You don't understand—if this happens now, after five years—I'm not a young woman and it's my whole life. . . ."

"It's Patsy's life, and she's only had seven years of it." Margaret hadn't an atom of pity for the distraught woman on the other end of the line. "If you'd only played fair with me I could have warned you . . ."

"Warned me?"

"That it's happened before."

"How do you know? Who told you? Did Mr. Poulden . . . It's not my fault. If they bring the police in . . ."

"I don't care about the police. I'm thinking of the undertaker. What did you say?"

There came from the other end of the line a groan so wretched that any tenderer heart must have been riven. But all Margaret thought was, "The fool! The coward! Afraid of Mr. Poulden and so Patsy has to pay. *Patsy!*"

"You'll come? Miss Reeve, you will come. We're doing everything possible. The doctor thinks it might turn the scale. You see, she's frightened. Children sometimes—little children, I mean—sometimes fear's as bad as a disease. I remember. They said that other time it wasn't my fault. And that's true. I wasn't even there, you know. And now—I have to obey instructions, don't I? And Mr. Poulden . . ."

"Does he know?"

"I can't get at him. I've only got the bank for his address. I can't imagine what he'll say."

"Can't you? Poisoned chocolates—and a druggist—can't you even add two and two? I'm coming. Of course I'm coming. I don't know about the trains. . . ."

"I've looked them up. There's one at 6:58. From Charing Cross. Can you get that?"

"I expect so." She looked sideways at her watch. "If I'm lucky, if I get a taxi . . ."

"I'll send a car to meet it. I'll meet every train. . . . This is my life, too. He must be a devil. He knew what people would say, after the last time. . . ."

” Margaret hung up and dashed for the stairs. Mrs. Shaw was teetering on the upper landing, like a distracted hen.

“Dear me, Miss Reeve. What a long call. Country, too. I do hope . . . It’s not bad news, is it?”

Margaret’s face hung white in the dusky air. “I’ve got to go, at once. Someone’s ill.” She couldn’t say Patsy’s name. She pushed roughly past.

Mrs. Shaw staggered a little. “Oh, dear. Tonight? Such horrid weather . . . Whenever will you get back?”

“I don’t know.” Margaret was on the flight above. Her voice came drifting down. “I’ll ring up in the morning. If they telephone from my job, will you explain? I’ll get in touch as soon as I can. If only there’s a taxi on the rank—I’ve got fourteen minutes.”

Mrs. Shaw was so much impressed that she ran to the front door herself, and stared wildly up and down. Through the dusk she saw a red-gold gleam. A cruising taxi. Would you believe it? Of all the luck. She ran on to the step, and shouted. The taxi paused at the corner, made a half-turn. Someone on the pavement called out but the taxi rolled on. Margaret came hastening down in a white plastic mackintosh, pulling the hood over her hair.

“A taxi!” babbled Mrs. Shaw. “Isn’t that fortunate? Look.” Panic seemed to be spreading like water through a gap. The taxi came cruising up and Margaret had the door open before it stopped.

“Charing Cross. It’s life or death.”

As the lights disappeared into the rainy dark Mrs. Shaw came back with a sigh. Always something happening. Not her concern, of course, but it did make you wonder. . . . She hadn’t been able to hear much, only Margaret’s side of it. What had she said? Something about Patsy’s life and only seven years. She went into her room and turned on the radio. It was only in the evenings that she had any time to herself at all. There was a play on tonight—absorbing. She knitted as she listened. Soon she’d forgotten all about that frantic telephone call.

Margaret had four minutes in hand when she reached the station. The train was in, not many people traveling, no delay about getting a ticket. She hurried up the platform looking for an empty car. She couldn’t stand it if anyone tried to talk to her tonight. Moving away over the river, all the lights blazing, with halos around them because of the rain, the Royal Festival Hall lighted up—there was a new ballet this evening and Royalty expected—“Margaret, what’s ballet? Oh, will you take me one day?” Wasn’t there a single thing in the world that didn’t lead to Patsy’s door? Not many people about, the rain lashing the windows—Margaret tried to piece things together. Of course Mrs. Derry had written to Mr. Poulden about her visit, and he’d known that for him, too, the wheel had begun to

turn once more. So, how simple! A box of chocolates, a little hole drilled in the bottom, everyone knew about that, a pinch of deadly poison, the hole sealed. And Patsy, innocent Patsy, thinking Kind Margaret, taking one then another . . . The picture was too clear. Outlined against the damp, hazy air of the car she saw Patsy's face, the wide, smiling mouth, the eyes intent under the mop of dark curls. . . .

Think of something else, think of Mr. Poulden, waiting for the news. Mrs. Derry couldn't write to him direct; she only had his bank as an address. She'd write tomorrow, he wouldn't know for two days. For two days he'd got to wait and wonder if he'd been successful. If! There was no if about it. There can be few surer ways of killing a child than by poisoned candy. Probably only the smallest pinch in each piece. Children aren't like adults, they don't take one chocolate and shut the box. They hover like—like butterflies (or is it bees?) going from flower to flower, a sip here, a sip there. . . . Yes, this time he'd be safe. Or so he thought.

But he wouldn't. Mr. Crook would have to admit he was wrong. . . . Oh, to hell with Mr. Crook. Who cared if he was right or wrong, if Patsy didn't come through? Why hadn't she asked more questions? How many pieces had she eaten? Had the doctor brought a stomach pump? How long had Mrs. Derry waited before she *sent* for the doctor? She was in a blue funk, something had happened in the past, another child had died—they'd said it wasn't her fault—had Edwin known? Yes, of course. That's how he could bend her to his will. Bend her to his will! What a melodramatic phrase! But this was melodrama.

She put her hands over her eyes, stared out at the black country through which they were streaming as smoothly as the rain streamed down the windows. It was open country now. This was a quick train, thank goodness for that. No one was likely to interrupt her. . . . How dark the world looked. People spoke of the danger of London after dark, it was nothing compared with the empty countryside. Ghosts walk in empty spaces, woods are haunted, spirits return. . . . Patsy had been afraid of Miss Bannerman's empty room in case it wasn't truly empty after all. But on *that* night she'd defeated her fear. . . . There you are, back again, back at Patsy.

She looked feverishly at the watch on her wrist. Halfway, that's all. Another forty minutes, and any one of them might be Patsy's last. The sweat stood out on her forehead, she must go and wash. Anything was better than sitting here in this empty coach, remembering. . . . There was a roar as a London-bound train tore past; sparks flew from the rails; the girl had a lightning glimpse of faces seen through glass, pale, staring, swept out of sight before they could be realized. That was the world; strangers sweeping past each other, she to Patsy, Patsy who might at this very instant be down in the eternal dark, they to London—for what? Pleasure? Fear? Ordeal? She stood up, pushing the hair away from her forehead; she caught sight of herself in the strip of glass above the four empty seats

opposite, a pale, staring face, eyes like chips. . . .

She almost ran out of the car into the corridor, leaving the plastic mackintosh on the seat. She had tucked her bag under her arm, and she swayed down the passage toward the lavatory. The train was going very fast now, she was almost shaken off her feet. Eyes watched her, indifferent, blank, or perhaps intent, she couldn't tell, from the carriages she passed. Not many people traveling, sometimes two or three carriages together without a soul in them. In one a man sat with his face in a newspaper, in another an elderly woman moaned to a girl. "I'll never feel the same again," she was muttering. "The blood!" "Oh, Mother," said the girl, "don't take on so. Accidents can happen to anyone."

A pang like a dagger of ice struck at her heart. Where had she heard those words before? Someone had said them. Who? She stared through the glass of the corridor window and a pale, wild face stared back. Margaret Reeve's ghost walking step for step with Margaret Reeve. She put up a hand to hide the reflection and the face disappeared. A few lights twinkled in the distance, the rain drove down again. How furious it was, how relentless, like the end of the world. She found the lavatory door locked and went quickly through to the next corridor. A man with a black moustache looked up as she leaned against the window and stared at the rain. He got to his feet, turned in her direction. Panic seized her and she fled back.

The lavatory door swung loose now; a woman in a red mackintosh was walking away from her toward one of the empty cars.

Margaret slipped inside, shot the bolt, and sluiced cold water over her face and wrists. Then she turned the faucet of the hot tap but nothing happened. People who traveled so late couldn't expect conveniences. The chain of the cistern swung to and fro in what appeared a menacing fashion. Someone had lowered the window a little and there was a rustling sound as though a snake coiled in the darkness. Panic struck her again, and then she realized it was the wind moving the thin sheets of paper stamped with the name of a much-advertised deodorant. She laughed shakily, and the stranger in the little mirror on the wall gibbered back at her.

She opened the door and ran down the passage, banging from wall to wall. Eyes watched her from every car— no, that was nonsense, half of them were empty. But they watched from the other side of the glass, from the dark night and the pouring rain. She heard someone laugh and was terrified in case it might be herself. Only mad people laughed, except for joy. Joy, what a word, on such a night. For a moment the walls about her seemed to dissolve. She was precipitated into a wave of wet darkness. She caught the door of a car; empty, no white mackintosh on the seat. She passed another and another, the man still read his paper, the elderly woman still moaned about blood. Other people were no more than shapes,

she couldn't have told you their sex even.

The woman in the red mackintosh was sitting in a window corner; she must have been next door. Margaret remembered how easy it is to hear people talking on these trains. Had she been talking aloud? Very likely. If so, the woman would think her crazy. She came to the next car, and stopped abruptly. It was a first class, all the thirds had gone by. "I've missed mine," she thought, then remembered that she had sat in the last coach of the third-class section. The woman in the red mackintosh must have come into her car. Perhaps she was nervous, too, wanted company. Only—she was sitting in the place Margaret had occupied. She must have known it was taken because of the mackintosh.

I've made a mistake, it was the car next to that. But that was empty, too, and there was a map instead of a mirror. Abruptly she turned back, pushed open the door. The woman in the red mackintosh didn't move. This was a nightmare world, it was clear what had happened. X. had gone to the lavatory, feeling sick, had swayed out, looking for her own car, overshot the mark, fumbled her way in here and died in the corner. Only a dead woman could lie so limp. Death was everywhere tonight, death over the telephone, death—where? "Don't take on so, Mother, accidents can happen to anyone." And now this. Well, what next? Pull the cord, summon the guard? But that meant delay, holding up the train. The car meeting her mightn't wait, Patsy was calling "Margaret! Margaret." An echo from long ago floated into her mind. Call once more before you go, call once yet, in a voice that she will know. . . . "Margaret—Margaret." Never mind, you couldn't let people die and do nothing. She thrust open the door, drew it behind her, as if the passage was full of ghosts all waiting to come crowding in. She sat down opposite.

"Excuse me! Are you all right?" She touched the red mackintosh.

The stranger wasn't dead, after all; she turned and stared at Margaret. And she wasn't a stranger.

She was Beryl Poulden, nee Fowler.

The shock was so great that at first Margaret couldn't accept the implications. This was, so to speak, a mirage in reverse, a vision of horror instead of a dream of relief. She sat staring, waiting for the red mackintosh to dissolve, like a drift of red dust floating away through the crack of open window. But it didn't happen. Rather did her companion seem to take on body, expression fitted the blank features, scorn and anger blazed in the dark eyes.

"You fool!" said the voice. "You little meddling fool! Why couldn't you keep out of things that don't concern you? This is the second time you've interfered. Last time you got away. Why couldn't you accept your luck? It never happens twice."

The words went swirling past her like the trees and hedges on the other side of the glass; and as no detail of them could be perceived, thanks to the

speed and rocking of the train, and the drops that still meandered madly down the windows, so the truth of Mrs. Pouliden's words eluded her. It was like being in the dark, knowing you're not alone, knowing that unless you act like a flash you're lost, but helpless because you don't know from which direction the danger threatens.

So—"I don't know what you mean," she said at last in a stupid, sleepy voice. "Patsy is my concern."

"There's nothing wrong with your beloved Patsy."

"The poisoned chocolates! Oh!" The light came on suddenly. "There weren't any chocolates."

"You're quite a bright girl sometimes. It's a pity it's only in flashes, a pity for you, I mean."

"And it was you on the telephone—all that talk about another child. . . ."

"Was perfectly true. Only, of course, it didn't happen to me."

"And that's the hold Mr. Pouliden has over her." She brooded; for the moment the snake seemed to have coiled down, was at peace. "I knew there was something wrong about that telephone call. She said a country call for you, Miss Reeve, and it went on for about five minutes, and there weren't any time signals. That should have warned me."

"Nobody thinks of everything," Beryl assured her, in quite a kind voice. "We didn't think, for instance, that you'd run Mrs. Derry to ground. I wonder how you did."

Margaret wasn't listening. "The communication cord," she thought. "Pull the communication cord." Her eyes betrayed her. Before she could spring to her feet, Beryl had caught her arm.

"I shouldn't do that. It won't help you. I shall say I pulled it to prevent you throwing yourself out of the car."

"They wouldn't believe you."

"When they knew you'd tried to gas yourself a little while ago they would. Besides, I should have a witness."

"You can't. There's no one here."

Like an actor entering on his cue, the door slid back and Edwin Pouliden came in.

He sat down next to Margaret and took her hand. "You must have been very anxious for us to meet again," he said. "You can't really have been taken in by that story. Mrs. Derry had told you Patsy wasn't there, so how could she give her chocolates? You know, it was really very unkind of you to stir things up again just when they were settling nicely. Now Patsy's got to start all over again, getting used to doing without you, I mean."

She spoke huskily through lips cracked as if she'd been in a blizzard.

"I shall go back."

"As a ghost? I don't think anyone would like that."

Margaret looked up, feeling as if already she had had the blow on the

head that perhaps they were contemplating. They were both mad, of course; even in this moment of desperation she realized that. Murderers are always mad, even if the law doesn't recognize it. The trouble is that, not being recognized, they can't be shut up where they won't be a danger to anyone else. And sometimes, it's true, they pull it off, in spite of the police and that good-hearted creature, the man in the street. Edwin had Margaret's arm in his grip; he looked across at his wife.

"No," cried Margaret, suddenly understanding that glance. "No."

It was no use; she hadn't a chance, hemmed in against the window by Poulden's thin body, with Beryl Poulden holding her other hand. She felt the prick of the needle and gave a little cry, but there was no one to hear. The first-class cars were all empty, and the one beyond on the other side wasn't occupied either. Quite soon she wasn't worrying any more, just drowsy and acquiescent. She knew she was moving somewhere, and someone was supporting her, but where she was going and what would be the end of the journey had ceased to be of any importance.

There was only one more stop before Finchford, and that was Harne. Harne was quite an important station; the mails were loaded here, and goods for the morning market on the South Coast towns. It was the danger spot if you were of lawless intent, because a few people always got on, and if they walked up the corridor, peering through the windows, looking, as travelers in England always do, for an empty car, they might remember a little group of three, one of whom wore a noticeable red mackintosh.

But as it happened they didn't, because by the time the train had stopped and people had started climbing in and walking along, the group had split up. A tall, thin man with a woman in a red mackintosh made their way slowly toward the exit. In the car they'd left, another woman was propped in a corner wrapped in a white plastic raincoat. One or two of the newcomers glanced through the sliding door, but the woman seemed asleep and there were plenty of empty cars, so no one disturbed her. Which was what Edwin Poulden had counted on. There are some chances you have to take and, if you're lucky, they come off.

At Finchford the porter (questioned twenty-four hours later by a chap who from his manner might just have escaped from the nuthouse) remembered a woman in a white raincoat leaving the station in a state of dither. She looked wildly about her and said something about a car. The porter told her there wouldn't be any station taxis out so late in weather like this, but a minute or two later a car did actually drive up and a tall man got out. She ran to meet him, and climbed into the seat next to the driver, and the car disappeared into the rain. "There wasn't anyone else to be seen," said the porter, "just the man jumping out and jumping back as fast as possible, and no wonder, seeing what the weather was like."

eleven

It was still raining like the river of eternity when the Pouldens and their companion reached Leysmith around about midnight. In such weather there was no one in the street where the persistent deluge fogged the lights and sent up fountains in the gutters. For the most part people were abed, but here and there lights showed behind curtains where nightbirds played cards or listened to the late program of the B.B.C. or even read books. The car slowed up, showing only side lights, as it stole through the empty streets. The house they had rented stood on a corner, almost opposite a public house, but that had been closed by law some while ago, and the publican and his wife were sensibly abed. Edwin slipped out and opened the garage gates and Beryl drove the car in. The third occupant noticed nothing; she might have been dead already and how they wished she were. There was a side door from the garage leading into the house itself, and Beryl passed through this, hurrying from room to room to draw the curtains before switching on a light. There was always the hundredth chance that someone returning unusually late would take up and note a sudden square of gold patching the dark front. The curtains, fortunately from their point of view, were made of strong light-resistant material, with valances and wide fittings. When they were drawn, no glimmer of light would be seen from outside. She came back to the garage, and between them they got the slight figure of the visitor up the stairs into the spare room. Beryl undressed her, removing her clothes, and covered her up.

"She'll sleep till morning?" she asked. "You're sure, Edwin. We can afford no mistakes now."

He smiled at her, a stretching of lips from which every vestige of color had departed.

"I shall be on guard," he said. "A sleepless night is nothing new to me."

He looked around the room, the dark curtains drawn over windows facing a square, blank yard. There were no matches and he had removed the electric light bulb. As he left the room he turned the key softly on the outside of the door.

The light had flowered in the morning sky when Margaret awoke. She looked around her in perplexity that scarcely differed from an idiot's stupor. Nothing her eyes beheld was familiar. The walls here were distempered a pale cream, hung with obviously amateur water colors. There were two or three china ornaments on the mantel shelf, a pair of bronze kittens under a red umbrella, a bust of Shakespeare, suitably bald, perched on three of his own books.

"Where on earth can I be?" Memory struggled with the shadows, slowly dispersed them. The telephone call—the train—the woman in the red mackintosh. Suddenly it all flashed into clarity. She sat up—and realized

that her hands were fastened behind her back. With her shoulder she pushed aside the blankets and saw that she was undressed, naked as the day she was born. Hurriedly she shuffled the clothes over herself again, and lay back, staring at the shut door.

After some time she heard steps outside, the key turned and Beryl came in. She carried a tray with a teapot and some toast on a plate. Over her arm was a red woolen dressing gown.

"So you're awake," she said. "I've brought your breakfast."

"I don't want any breakfast."

"That's silly." She set the tray down. "Come, put this on. Mr. Poulden wants to speak to you."

"I've nothing to say to him. I don't want to see him."

"Then you'll be unlucky. He means to see you. Well, are you going to wear the dressing gown or . . ."

"I can't put it on. You know that."

Beryl approached the bed. "No tricks, mind. You've made enough trouble as it is." She unfastened the scarf binding the girl's wrists, that were rigid from constriction. She pulled the gown over the shaking body and fastened the cord at the waist. "Now, drink some tea. I've brought a cup for myself. We've got to settle a lot of things, and you'll feel better with some food inside you."

She poured the tea and offered the tray. "Take your choice. That'll show you you've no ground for your suspicions."

With a shaking hand the girl took the nearest cup. "No one knows better than I the comfort a cup of tea can bring," Miss Sheppard had said when she gave her the little blue teapot and cup, seeing her off to Mortcomb. The hot liquid warmed her so that her trembling became noticeably less.

"What is this place?"

"A temporary lodging," returned Beryl, equably. "You're going to stay with us for a little while. You'll be safe here."

"I was safe in London."

"Not really. You're like a child with a matchbox. You warn it it's dangerous to play with fire, but it doesn't seem able to resist temptation."

"You mean Patsy? She is all right. Yes, of course, I remember. There never were any poisoned chocolates."

"Of course not. What an idea. I'm afraid you suffer from delusions, Miss Reeve."

Shock widened her eyes. "Is that what you're going to say?" (Say? To whom?) "Who knows I'm here?"

"Who is there to know? You're a funny girl, Margaret Reeve. You don't seem to make friends. Here's Mr. Poulden now. Come in, Edwin." She opened the door wider. "Margaret's had a nice sleep. I'll go down and get on with things and you have a little chat."

"Why have you brought me here?" Margaret demanded, as Beryl's

footsteps died away.

"It's for your good really. You were getting involved with things that didn't concern you, that could be dangerous."

"That's the word she used—your wife, I mean."

"You're so headstrong, Margaret." Edwin Poulden sighed. "You won't take good advice. Did you tell Miss Sheppard you were leaving London in such a hurry?"

"You know there wasn't any time . . ." She stopped. "Go easy," her intelligence warned her. "If he thinks there was anyone . . ."

"I told my landlady, of course.

"Really? That you were called to a sickbed?"

"Yes. She got the taxi for me, and she's going to let my employers know."

"Most co-operative. So she won't be surprised to hear you won't be coming back for a few days."

"Is that what you're going to tell her?"

"Beryl's going out to telephone in a few minutes."

"Don't you have the telephone here?"

Edwin smiled. He said nothing. The shivers began to return.

"How long am I going to stay here?" she demanded.

"Not long, I expect."

"I'd like to ring up myself," said Margaret, carefully.

"Now be a sensible girl. You know quite well we can't allow that. Just imagine what you might say. You're not—responsible."

She exclaimed in abrupt tones, "I'm not mad. You can't pretend that."

"Of course not. Just a little—hysterical—perhaps."

She asked hoarsely, "Why have you brought me here?" And then, when he made no reply, she jumped out of bed and, thrusting past him, ran to the windows, pushing the curtains back. But though she tugged frantically at the sash, it didn't budge.

"What is it?" She turned back, panting and breathless. "They—you've screwed them up."

"We're in a very responsible position," said Edwin, smiling. "You're a minor. And we don't want a second attempt, do we?"

"Second . . ."

"You haven't forgotten the gas? No, no, it would be a fatal beginning for me if my wife—my late wife's ward—were to throw herself out of a window."

She stared at him. "You know I didn't mean that."

"You can't want the window open for ventilation purposes on a wet, blowy morning like this. And there won't be anyone going by, if that was in your mind. This room faces on a blank wall. I shouldn't care to lease this house for any considerable period, such a poor room to offer guests. You must accept our apologies."

The door was pushed open and Beryl reappeared. "Have you finished with the tray? I'll leave everything shipshape, and there's a hot pot in the pantry. It just wants putting in the oven. I expect Margaret will be hungry."

"Where are you going?" There was undisguised panic in the voice now.

"She's going up to London to fetch your luggage. You can't be spared just at present. Your landlady—what's her name, by the way?" Margaret folded her lips. "Well, it's of no consequence," continued Mr. Poulden easily. "We have the address. Yes, Beryl's going to fetch your traps; you'll feel more comfortable with your own things. And presently, this evening, we'll all go for a ride together. You'll like that, Margaret, won't you? Won't you?" He laughed. "Somehow you don't give me the impression you're enjoying your stay here."

Still laughing, he went out of the room; she heard the key turn once more in the lock.

"I wish you wouldn't," said Beryl, meeting him on the staircase. "Taunt her like that, I mean. Oh, I know we have no choice, but all the same—I wish we could have thought of something else."

"You remember what I told you. . .

The word "rope" rang in her mind, and she hardened. "Yes. It's the waiting I can't stand. If we could have finished it off last night."

"We can't take any risks this time. So fortunate she isn't staying with Miss Sheppard. Now, you know the program."

"Yes. I ought to go if I'm to walk to the station."

"I wish I could drive you, but under the circumstances. . . ."

"Of course not. We're taking enough risks as it is. I shall catch the local train to Barminster. There's a twenty-minute wait which should give me ample time to get through to Calcutt Street and leave the message. Then I'll catch the excursion to Paddington, and go around for the baggage after lunch. I'll take a taxi, and go straight back to Paddington and come back on the 2:38, if I'm lucky."

"I hope the luggage won't be too much for you," said Edwin anxiously. "I don't feel it would be safe to take a taxi here from the station, in case questions should be asked. Though I can't imagine who would ask them."

"You can leave that to me. If necessary I can ditch the luggage somewhere. You'll be able to manage all right?"

"Yes. Everything's mapped out. She can't make much trouble without any clothes, and I'll give her another shot presently. I shan't be able to go out this morning, of course. It would be too risky. But fortunately the weather provides an excellent excuse. This afternoon we'll lay your alibi. My dearest, I think you should go. If you miss that train, it'll throw out the whole program. And remember, in twelve hours' time, it'll all be over, Margaret Reeve will have vanished, and we shall be safe."

She said jerkily, "I still can't believe this is me involved in this

melodrama. I never dreamed I could care like this for anyone. Oh, Edwin, look out for yourself. If anything happens to you, it'll be the end of my world.

Shortly before 4 o'clock Mr. Poulden went into Margaret's room bringing her clothes.

"Get these on, Margaret," he said. "We're going out for a little."

Dumbly she shook her head.

"I should have thought you'd like to go out. Are you afraid of the rain? We shall take the car, of course. Now, don't waste time. Beryl will be back by six, and we must be here to greet her."

Margaret found her voice. "You mean, *you* must."

"I mean both of us. She's bringing your things down from London. We shall want to make sure that everything's there."

Did that hold out the least promise of hope—hope of delay at all events? If she could pretend there was something missing . . . not that delay was likely to help her, since nobody knew where she had gone, except perhaps Mrs. Shaw, and who was going to approach Mrs. Shaw? Still, every hour gained was surely something. She took up her clothes and, as the door shut, began to dress. When she came downstairs she found Mr. Poulden waiting in the hall. He had a red mackintosh in his hand.

"You'd better put this on," he said. "It's pelting still."

Margaret looked around. "That isn't mine."

"You haven't got one."

"I had. I had. A white plastic one. I had it in the train yesterday. It had my name on the tab." Her heart beat high. If someone found that . . .

Edwin was frowning. "You hadn't got it when you arrived here. Well, no matter. I dare say the authorities won't trouble themselves much about a cheap mackintosh, unless inquiries are made. Anyway, put this one on for the moment."

Rather roughly he thrust her arms into the sleeves, and she pulled the hood over her pale gold hair.

The garage door was open and the gate pegged back. Margaret got in, with Mr. Poulden beside her. He drove out, leaving both gates wide, and into the wet road. Margaret thought, "This is my chance. I'm out of the house. I must attract attention somehow, someone must pass." She lifted her hand and rapped on the window; a woman on the pavement turned sharply. Mr. Poulden lifted one hand from the wheel and took off his hat.

Margaret stared. "Who was that?"

"I haven't the smallest idea. Beryl and I haven't mixed with our neighbors. But the good lady will suppose you recognized her and wanted to wave. Don't do that again, Margaret. I don't want us to be conspicuous." Margaret began to laugh and to her horror found she couldn't stop. "You're hysterical," said Mr. Poulden sharply. "I shall have to get a doctor to

prescribe a sedative. Margaret, be quiet.”

But she couldn't, she couldn't. “You don't want to be conspicuous,” she wept helplessly. He turned into a lane and stopped the car. He put an arm around her shoulder, his other hand over her mouth; suddenly he jerked her head back, his palm over nose and lips, so that she fought for breath. Abruptly the laughter ceased.

“That's better,” approved Mr. Poulden. “We'll drive about for a little, till you're quite recovered. The country around here is very pretty.”

Margaret saw little of the country, however. Quite soon the tablet she had been compelled to swallow had performed its work, and by the time the car stopped before a smart pastry shop in the high street she was perfectly quiet, her head resting against the side of the car. Mr. Poulden drew up and opened the door. There were half a dozen women inside the shop and he politely waited his turn.

“I've called for a cake ordered on Monday, name of Poulden,” he said. “A coffee layer cake . . .”

It was already packed and as he paid for it he said, “Have you any of those flapjacks we like so much?”

The girl was afraid they hadn't. They had some shortbreads . . .

“I'll just ask my wife.” He carried the box out to the car, opened the door and laid it on Margaret's knee. A moment later he returned to say he would take twelve shortbreads. The rain was still falling heavily, and nobody was likely to stop or notice a woman lying back in a relaxed attitude, her head fallen a little forward, her hair covered by a red mackintosh hood. His errand accomplished, Mr. Poulden re-entered the car and drove back to Runnymede Road.

Beryl was due back about 6 o'clock and from a few minutes before the hour Mr. Poulden was like a cat on hot bricks. The rain had thinned to a fine drizzle that nevertheless stung the cheeks like needle points. He drew back the curtain and glanced down the road, but casually, because he couldn't get it out of his mind that people were watching his smallest action, and might debate what drew him to the window on this cheerless night, and why he sent his glance so ardently up and down the street. The clock struck six and he compelled himself to come back to the center of the room. Everything now was in readiness, but his plan depended on a strict adherence to the program. The clock moved on, presently it struck the halfhour. Mr. Poulden was like a man in torment. He had no thought at all for his victim, who, still half-drugged, lay in her room upstairs behind a locked door. By half past seven he was frantic, not only because of the inevitable postponement of his plan, but because something desperate must have happened to Beryl that she had neither returned nor telephoned to explain her delay. Of course, he reminded himself, she might be playing safe and not calling. Telephone calls from London can be traced, and if questions should be asked later (and when you're planning crime in a big

way, you must be prepared for every eventuality) it might be difficult to produce the caller, since he had taken so much care to make it seem that he and his wife had been out in the car together during the afternoon. At half past seven he tiptoed up the stairs and peeped into Margaret's room. The drug still had its effect, but it wouldn't be safe to rely on it throughout the night. Not that she could do much in this poky little hole, but desperate people think of things that don't occur to those not in their straits, and he wanted no nosey parkering on the part of his neighbors.

It was after 9 o'clock when he heard the gate swing open and steps approach the front door. He opened it cautiously. Beryl stood outside, with a blue fabric suitcase in one hand and a square brown paper bag bearing the name of a well-known London store in the other.

Mr. Poulden drew his wife within and carefully closed the door. "What happened to you? I've been half out of my mind. ..."

"Wasn't it on the radio?" She stared. "The train accident, I mean? Yes, our train collided with a stationary train at Humber ton. Four people killed and about forty injured."

"But you—you're all right."

"Only a few bruises." She smiled up at him tenderly. "Edwin, you look as though you were going to faint."

"I thought—what happened—after the accident, I mean?"

"The front cars were actually at the platform. I was halfway down the train. My father always taught us to travel halfway, in case of accidents. He said if you did the colliding the people in the front cars were in the worst danger, and if something ran into you the people at the back took the brunt. In either case the middle was the best."

"And . . ."

"I climbed out with various other people and we made our way along to the platform. I must say they were very expeditious. Ambulances and stretchers seemed to pop up out of the ground. There were doctors and nurses, stopping all the passengers and asking them if they were hurt, and herding them into waiting rooms, to get their names and addresses, I suppose."

He said carefully, "Did you have to give yours?"

"I shouldn't have given my own in any case, and as I wasn't hurt no one would have paid me any attention, but I didn't want to be held up longer than necessary, so I slipped away and saw a local train standing. It was almost due to start, so I got into an empty car and we were off in a few minutes. I could hear voices next door, everybody discussing the accident. We stopped at every station, and people got in and out; someone got in with me, but he didn't speak. I was watching the map on the wall. I knew my only chance of getting back to the main line was by changing at some distributing center, and when we got to Abbots Malsford I remembered there was a branch line to Leysmith. I had to wait some time, but there

wasn't much light on the platform and not many people about. I don't suppose anyone noticed me."

Edwin drew a deep breath. "Thank Heaven, you're all right."

"Yes, I'm all right. What bothered me most was that it was wrecking our plan. It's too late tonight, I suppose."

"Much too late. The tide sealed the mouth of that cave more than an hour ago. We shall have to wait till tomorrow."

"I don't like it," said Beryl restlessly. "Every extra hour weighs like a load of bricks. How is she?"

"She's sleeping now. It was all right about this afternoon. We got the cakes. Are all her things there?" He nodded at the blue fabric case.

"I hope so. I waited about and luck was with us there at least. The landlady, who'd been standing at the window for nearly half an hour, came out and got on a bus. I thought the fewer people I saw the better, and, as it happened, I didn't have to see anyone. The taxi driver collected the case, and handed over the money; I explained it was a tremendous close shave if I caught the train, and I didn't have to come out of the taxi at all. I got the other things." She opened the square brown bag to show a plain twin set in blue wool and a checked skirt.

"No one's going to be able to identify those," she said. "They had them hanging on the hook by the hundred, and no one's allowed to try anything on. I just picked up a skirt and paid for it, and matched up the twin set. I wasn't in the shop ten minutes."

As she spoke she unpinned the price tags and tossed them with the bill into the wastepaper basket. "We can send her own things to one of those poor churches that are always advertising for clothes in the personal column. We won't send them from here, of course, and there's no need to put on an address. They wouldn't trace them in a hundred years. Thank goodness she's not the sort that wears originals." She spoke with an unaffected sincerity that made even the hardened Edwin shiver; now she had no more thought of the helpless girl upstairs as a human being than if she'd been a wax doll she was proposing to stand in front of the fire and watch melt into an anonymous pool.

The ringing of the telephone made them both jump. Edwin took the call.

"Who? Mr. Drover? (Drover was the druggist whose business he was purchasing.) Yes. About four, you say? Oh, I'm sorry, my wife and I were out doing a bit of shopping. Yes, tomorrow morning. I could come around about eleven, if that suits you. I think everything's settled. No, I'll come around to you. Right."

He hung up. "We don't want anyone coming here, not in the morning. I'm with you, Beryl. I don't like this delay. It seems unlucky to me. Still, everything's gone pretty smoothly so far. No trouble at Calcutt Street? Ah well, I didn't anticipate any. No one had called her or anything?"

"I didn't hear of it. Anyway, the landlady would explain that she'd gone

down to the country. Even if Mrs. Derry's questioned, we shan't be implicated. People will think that was a blind, she was off with some man friend. . . . No, all that's covered, I fancy."

Upstairs Margaret was coming out of her somnolent state. She stood with her ear to the door, hearing voices, but not what they were actually saying. The watch on her wrist, that she must have wound automatically since it was still ticking, warned her that it was much later than six o'clock. Mrs. Poulden must have been home a long time, yet no one had come up to bring her any supper or ask any questions. Then she thought, "But if they had I shouldn't know," and fell back on the bed.

The door opened and Edwin came in. "Awake again? Good, We've got your things here. You'll be able to wear your own nightdress tonight." He put the case down and she grabbed at it eagerly, as though it constituted a rope that held her to life.

"The train was late," Mr. Poulden went on. "I dare say you wondered. Mrs. Poulden will bring you your supper in a minute, and then I'll shut you in for the night."

"I don't like being locked in."

"You might walk in your sleep," countered Mr. Poulden smoothly. "In a strange house you could do yourself some harm."

It was no good; she was as helpless as a mouse in a trap. In the legend the other mice had assembled and, by standing on the trap, had contrived to open it and let the prisoner escape, but there were no other mice here, or so she believed. But she was wrong.

twelve

Margaret's letter had troubled Dr. Lamb. Like Caliban, he detected an ancient and fishlike smell, because, if everything had been aboveboard, why pretend Patsy wasn't at The Grey House when Tom's presence there was absolute proof that she was? He was surprised to find how much his own feelings had changed during the past weeks. At first Margaret had been a rather tiresome girl who had neglected an old woman left in her charge—that's how it seemed to him. But now he'd dropped off the fence and come down on her side. He wondered how he had ever believed even for a moment in the attempted suicide, or at all events in the manner of it. No, Poulden was the villain of the piece, and he wouldn't put it past the man to take a second bite at the cherry, as they said. And, come to think of it, he reminded himself, Margaret was in much the same situation as the little girl. Each had one obstacle between herself and what might be mortal peril. Patsy had Margaret and Margaret (rather to Dr. Lamb's own astonishment) had Dr. Lamb.

So he wrote to her to hold her hand in this matter for a few days until he could come up to London, having a little leave due to him, and hold it for her. Having signed, sealed and stamped the letter he ran out of the house smack into a street accident. He worked, as madly as once Mrs. Derry had done, to save a child's life, and with greater success. Unfortunately, by the time he was sure the lad would recover he'd forgotten about the letter and only found it that evening when he turned out his pockets. By that time it had missed the second mail, so he dropped it in the box first thing next day. Up in London a silly sorter put it in the wrong pile, and so of course it went to the wrong house. One way and another it didn't get to Calcutt Street for nearly four days after it was written. By which time Margaret had left that address—forever.

Charles was a little perturbed to find no letter waiting for him at his London rendezvous. He'd asked Margaret to tell him which was her day off, so he went around to Calcutt Street to settle the matter in person. The door was opened by a stout young woman like a suet pudding without the treacle. She looked adenoidal to a professional eye and when she spoke it was obvious that she was.

"Biss Reebe? You've just bissed her."

"You mean she's just gone out. When's she coming back? Did she say?"

"She's gone—for good. Yesterday . . ."

"Make up your mind, angel," said Dr. Lamb. "A minute ago you said just now."

The angel decided to take offense. "You bedder see Bissis Shaw." She took a couple of steps backwards and called, "Bissis Shaw. Subwud for Biss Reebe." And she droned away down the hall like an outraged bee.

Mrs. Shaw was all the landladies of inexpensive lodgings rolled into one. You could pass a hundred of her kind in the street and not know them apart.

"Miss Reeve?" she said. "Well, I don't know, I'm sure." She giggled with anticipation. That generally brought a smart repartee from whomever she happened to be talking to. Dr. Lamb said nothing, so she assumed at once he was a bit short in the upper story.

"Shaw," she explained, "I'm sure."

"I'm with you," said the young man, looking less amused than ever. "Have you an address for Miss Reeve?"

"Oh dear, do you mean you don't know where she is? I did hope . . ."

"Hope what?"

Mrs. Shaw looked about her vaguely. "There was a letter come—I didn't know what to do with it."

She plucked it from the green baize board nailed to the wall.

Charles recognized his own handwriting. "How long has that been there?"

"Cub—I mean, come—this morning. Went to the wrong address, see?" (Oh, obviously a bit touched.)

"And when did Miss Reeve go?"

"Last night."

"Without leaving an address?"

"She never thought of that. She was in such a state. Because of the telephone call, see?"

"What call was that?"

"Well, she never said who it was from, just that she must go at once, someone ill, and she'd ring up next day only she never did, and if they rang up from her job would I let them know. And they did, and I told them. Not a little put out, they were."

"Too bad," said Dr. Lamb, savagely.

"Well, it's these modern girls," explained Mrs. Shaw. "In and out of jobs like mice out of holes. Different when I was a girl."

"Didn't she give you any idea where she was going?" Dr. Lamb sounded desperate.

"Just. Charing Cross. I know that because I got the taxi for her."

"Take any luggage?"

"There wasn't time. I keep telling you. Besides, she expected to be back. Still, she sent for that—not more'n an hour ago."

"Sent for it?" Dr. Lamb's brows arched like inverted V-signs.

"That's right. Couldn't come herself, someone was too ill."

"Who was too ill?" But there wasn't more than one person who could stir Margaret to such depths. The situation smelled worse than ever.

"Well, I don't know, I'm sure." She half-started another giggle, then suppressed it hurriedly.

"Did you take the call?"

"As a matter of fact, it was Gloria. What is it? Have you got a cold?"

"I beg your pardon," apologized Dr. Lamb. "Was that Gloria I saw just now?"

"That's right. The names they think of these days. Ada was good enough for us."

"Maybe we could have Gloria back for a minute." Dr. Lamb jiggled some coins in his trouser pocket.

Mrs. Shaw looked dubious. "Well, all right, but only a minute, mind. The girl's got her work to do. Better come in," she added, pushing a scratched pine-veneered door open a few inches. She lifted up her voice. "Glor! Glor, come here a minute."

Gloria droned back. "Whad is it?"

Dr. Lamb took control of the situation. "It's about Miss Reeve's luggage. She rang up this morning?

"Thad's right."

"Did she say where she was phoning from?"

"Country. I heard the signals."

"Can you remember exactly what she said?"

"Said she wooden be cubbing back. Sumwud 'ud call for her things. Wood I pud them togedder and there'd be half a crowd for my trouble. Cubbing about midday, she said."

"Were you in when whoever it was came? Who was it, by the way?"

"A taxi."

"Quite." He repressed his impatience with an effort. "Who was in the taxi?"

"I never sor 'er."

"Then how do you know . . ."

"Driver god down and I give him the case. There was only the one, blue it was, and she 'adn't got much neither. Talk about charity children. I wouldn't be seen dead in her stockings."

"If you were dead," said Dr. Lamb repressively, "you'd presumably be occupied with something more important than the quality of your stockings. Go on. You gave the case to the driver. . . ."

Gloria suddenly decided to flare up, like a fire that, almost dead, surprises everyone by discovering a live coal in its heart.

"I dono what you're gedding at, bud if you thig there was anythig of hers that cub in and didn't go out you're making a big mistake, see? If I was to die this minid . . ."

"Which you're extremely likely to do," put in Charles in a grim tone, "because in one moment I'm going to take your fat silly head and bump it against the wall. Answer my question. How do you know there was a woman in the cab?"

"Because—ere, oo are you? The pleece?"

"I'm a doctor."

Gloria looked appeased.

"Oh! Screwy, was she?"

"No. For the last time. How do you know . . . ?"

"Driver said, 'That all, lady?' So you see . . ."

"Yes, I see," sighed Charles.

"May I ask"—Mrs. Shaw put a brisk question—"precisely where you come in, as it were? You're a doctor . . ."

"But not attending Miss Reeve professionally. The fact is, I'm going to marry her." Charles Lamb nearly fainted with amazement when he heard the words. Because no one was more surprised than himself. Still, surprise is the essence of most engagements (to other people, anyway) and it had to come sometime. Afterwards he wished he'd started the conversation with this announcement, for it immediately became clear that neither Mrs. Shaw nor Gloria could now do enough for him. Gloria searched her untidy mind, Mrs. Shaw beamed.

"Whyever didden you say so?" Gloria reproached him. "Anythig I can do . . ."

"Let's get back to the lady in the taxi," suggested Charles. "You never actually saw?"

"No wud saw her. No wud had the chance."

"That's what I thought you said. So that if you were presented with Myrna Loy and Helen of Troy you wouldn't be able to identify either of them?"

"It wasn't 'er that was screwy," she offered, frankly.

Charles' voice was heavy with patience. "Is that right?"

"That's right."

Charles put the half crown back in his pocket and produced a ten-shilling note.

"Nothing else comes to your mind?"

Gloria considered. It was a lengthy process.

"You didn't, for instance, hear where the taxi was going?"

"Yes, I did."

"You didn't mention it."

"You never asked. The driver said Paddington."

"Paddington!" exclaimed Dr. Lamb. "That's strange, isn't it? I mean, if she went from Charing Cross ..."

"You're right," marveled Mrs. Shaw. This was better than the Sunday papers. "You're sure about Paddington, Glor?"

"I said so, didn't I?" Gloria glared.

Charles passed over the ten-shilling note. "I'll leave my London address. I shall be here for a week, and if Marlene thinks of anything else don't hesitate to spend tuppence on a telephone call."

"Rip Van Winkle," said Gloria, humorously. "It's thrub-bence now."

Dr. Lamb didn't hear. Dr. Lamb had gone. He hopped into a nearby taxi—he hadn't brought the car around, motoring in London was hell—and was driven to 123 Bloomsbury Street, where Arthur Crook sat like an enormous brown spider waiting for the flies to come tumbling into his net.

"Well, well," said Crook when he'd heard the story. "Funny how that girl keeps popping up. All the same, I don't know what you want me to do. It's a free country or so they tell me."

"Exactly. I only want to be sure everybody in it is as free as they'd like to be. Did I happen to mention I'm going to marry the girl?"

"Must have slipped your memory," replied Crook, cordially. "She didn't mention it either."

"She doesn't know yet."

"That's right. Give 'em shock treatment. I'm told it never fails. Want me to act as your best man?"

"First of all, I want you to find the girl for me. Think, Crook. She goes down to Finchford and is told the child isn't there. She gets ocular proof that that's a lie, and leaves a clue that the child picks up. A few days later, she gets a frantic call from the country telling her someone's ill, she must come at once. She goes off hell for leather. There's only one person in the world who could have that effect on her.

"Patsy Warren."

"Precisely. Since Patsy is with Mrs. Derry—I think we can take that for gospel—it stands to reason the message would come from The Grey House."

"Well, it would look like that," amended Crook. "Carry on."

"What's happened in the past few days to make Mrs. Derry change her mind? We can be pretty sure she was acting under Poulden's orders when she said she'd never heard of the child."

"So"—Crook took up the tale—"you assume she was still acting under Poulden's orders when she rang Margaret Reeve yesterday. That's one explanation."

"Got a better one?"

"I'm a lawyer," said Crook, modestly, "and what I like is proof. The only fact we've got is that Margaret Reeve had a telephone call that sent her hell for leather to Charing Cross. This morning there's another call about the luggage, which is collected later by an anonymous female. . . ."

"And that's suspicious," Charles broke in. "Why didn't she let herself be seen?"

"Oh come, you don't really want me to answer that. Because she didn't want anyone to be in a position to identify her later on. You're right, Charles, there's something screwy here. You bein' a country mouse mightn't appreciate the difficulty of findin' a room at a possible rent in London at the present time, and if you've got one you don't let it go, not until you're darn sure you won't be wanting it again. Remember, this girl

has a job, she doesn't leave a message, she doesn't ring up and give an address, she can't possibly know right off that she isn't going to want that room again. Besides, she's got a job to hold down. The sensible thing would be to ask Mrs. Whatsit to hold it for a week. She can't really mean to stay at The Grey House, she hasn't anywhere else to go, she'd write—no, Charles, you're right. It reeks to high Heaven."

"What it amounts to," said Charles, carefully, "is that you don't believe Mrs. Derry made the call—unless, of course, she was acting under duress."

"It takes a whole of a lot of duress to involve yourself in a murder plot. My dear fellow, don't be so squeamish. You know perfectly well you don't believe in that suicide story."

"Well, not now that I know Margaret," Dr. Lamb agreed. "At first I was prepared to accept it, but if she had had any such idea, there were enough tablets in old Miss Bannerman's room to have done the job. And she'd never have taken the chance of that child coming up, possibly carrying a candle. Yes, I know the door of the room was locked, but the connecting door wasn't."

"Beginning to add up, ain't it?" said Crook. "You thought from the start there was something odd about the old lady's death. Come to that, I dare say you could put a name to the dame in the cab that came to Calcutt Street."

"The only person I can think of that Poulden would take into his confidence—and no one but Poulden is concerned with her future, or so he believes—is that new wife of his. Dammit, Crook, who else can it be?"

"There's one chance in a hundred it's Mrs. Derry. What's the second Mrs. P. like? Or haven't you met?"

"I never attended her professionally. She hadn't been in Mortcomb long, but I knew her by sight, of course. The kind that makes fortunes for psychos, dark, intense—you know the type."

"The only thing I know about the sex," countered Crook, grimly, "is that there ain't no types. That's what makes it so difficult to earn a bit of jam. Any notion where the Pouldens are now? You did say they'd left Mortcomb? Well, of course, they have. That stands out a mile."

"Because of Paddington?"

"You're like the bedbug," Crook approved. "You may be slow but you get there just the same. Well, if Miss Reeve went to Sussex and her luggage is goin' via Paddington, either there's to be no reunion between her and it or she never went to Sussex. What are your plans?"

"I thought I'd go to Finchford."

"Good enough. Don't stop at Mrs. Derry, though. Someone else might remember seeing the girl. Get a description of her?"

"I know what she looks like, thank you."

"I meant"—Crook sounded very patient—"what she was wearing. That's how people are identified. No one notices the color of your eyes. You

could pin in a pair of shoe buttons and ninety-nine people out of a hundred wouldn't notice the difference. And the hundredth 'ud only see it if he owned the boots the buttons had come from. Well, you do that, and I'll start out on the long trail, the old trail, the trail that is always new."

"How on earth will you get on to that?"

"There are ways. Happen to know if they were married at Mortcomb?"

"No. I mean, they weren't. They came up to London, first Poulden, and Miss Fowler a day or two later."

"Then Somerset House ought to be able to help us. Lucky they're the sort that believe in respectability. I mean, if they'd just set up house together . . ."

"They didn't. They were married at a London registrar's. There was a couple of lines in the local paper."

"You could have mentioned that earlier. That makes things easier." He thumped on a bell and when Bill Parsons, his invaluable A.D.C., looked in, he said, "Get a chap to go to Somerset House and find out the address of Mr. Edwin Poulden and Miss—what was her maiden name?"

"Fowler—Beryl Fowler."

"That's it—the addresses they gave for the certificate. Oh, and Bill. I want to know all you can get me about a Mrs. Derry, with a kids' home at Finchford. She'll have to be registered under the Act and she may have a past. I mean, what put our Mr. P. onto her? Sussex ain't his happy hunting ground. And how come she don't mind makin' false statements? My guess would be Mr. P. has some kind of a hold, and that suggests a police record to me. There'll be something, you take my word," he added confidently, as Bill went out. "That chap could find a blot on Sir Galahad's scutcheon, if he had to put it there himself. That's why I'd be as lost without him as ham without eggs or . . ."

"I can't wait for his report," interrupted Charles, in alarm.

"Nobody asked you. But you weren't thinking of marchin' in and presentin' a form for the lady to fill out, I suppose? No. Well, all the best. And remember what your young woman told you. Accidents can happen to anyone, and one vanishin' trick at a time is all I care to handle."

"How will you trail the Pouldens?" asked Charles.

"If they were married in London, they must have had addresses. There's nothing sets a woman's tongue wagging faster than a romance, as I believe they pronounce it nowadays. And when the bride ain't exactly in her first bloom—no, you leave that to me. I have a way with me, when I please ..."

"What sticks in my gullet," said Lamb, "is that I told her to let it ride."

"And you were right. What good's she done by not takin' your advice? The little girl's no better off, she's worse, and unless we're careful—and lucky—Mr. Murdering Poulden will have another crime—well, not on his conscience—but to his record. But you can never make janes see sense. They always know best."

There was a fierce note in his voice that was new to him. He didn't say as much to his companion, but in his heart he wondered what the Pouldens' next step would be. The little girl? Crook could be as tough as the next man when it came to adults—if you couldn't look after yourself in a world that was as hard as basalt to the weak, maybe you were better off in the churchyard—but harm done to children, who had the right to protection—he wouldn't have admitted it even to the Gestapo but that got under his skin.

Bill came back presently with the information that Mr. Poulden had given an address in Gower Street and Miss Fowler one in South Kensington.

“Right on my doorstep,” chortled Crook. “I’m on my way. My shoes I leave to you for the time bein’—don’t forget that chap, Belton, coming along sometime. Wants me to show he wasn’t in Camden Town last Thursday when both him and the police know he was. Try and work out a routine for him. If I get along now I’ll be in nice time for tea, and no woman’s ever so approachable as over the cup that cheers, or so they say. Not that it ever had much cheering effect on me.”

And off he went in the little red car, as though life held nothing for him but discovering the whereabouts of a girl who hadn't got a penny to bless herself with and would have to work for a year to pay his bill.

And for the moment, in fact, it didn't.

thirteen

The Towers, the private hotel where Beryl Fowler had put up for the statutory period before her wedding, was a nice corner house newly painted black and cream. There were window boxes and a porter (but he was off duty, seeing it was teatime) and good quality carpeting in the hall. It had a notice—Open to Non-Residents—so Crook marched in as if he owned the place and found himself in a comfortable lounge, full of sturdy old girls with one eye on the clock, waiting to press the bell the minute it struck the hour, if tea didn't appear simultaneously. Most of the chairs, and they catered to boarders of comfortable dimensions, had their regular occupants, but one, the best-cushioned and best-placed, was empty.

"That's my girl," decided Crook. "Let's hope it ain't my luck she's gone out to a bingo."

He knew a good deal about hotel life, though he'd scarcely ever spent a night in one. Just as gold diggers staked claims, and were ready to scalp anyone who got under their feet or tried to jump their rights, so permanent residents in hotels stake out *their* rights to certain chairs and certain tables. When someone dies—someone at the head of the list, that is—everyone moves up a step. There's no sense a newcomer thinking she can jump the queue and get the fireside chair, she's got to start from scratch like everyone else, and if she feels the cold, well, you can buy rugs, can't you, or put on an extra vest? There was a small, hard chair in a little island of carpet that nobody seemed to want, and when he'd given a wary look round Crook made for it. It didn't rate a table, but then he didn't care for tea. All he wanted was a bit of a chat, and then he'd go around to the Dappled Horse or The Two Chairmen and make up for lost time.

Everyone in these hotels knows everyone else; newcomers are subjected to the severest scrutiny, and there's some yardstick that outsiders never understand which enables residents to know at once who are visitors for other residents, who casual droppers-in and who new boarders. They placed Crook at once, one of the casuals. He hadn't come for anybody special because he hadn't asked at the desk; and he wasn't staying because he hadn't brought a bag, and anyway, though we're all democrats these days and practically anyone can wear the old school tie and most people couldn't care less, he definitely, my dear, wasn't the type you expect to find at the Towers. Rather like a bailiff, only of course in that case he wouldn't have been allowed in the drawing room. The clock struck four, all the residents sat up as though someone had wound them up, all their eyes swiveled from door to bell. The door opened and in came a large, handsome old woman with an eye about as friendly as a bull in a field, dressed in blue velvet that clashed with her blue hair. Crook beamed when he saw her. This was his cup of tea, all right. He preferred Minotaurs to

mice any day. She surged across the room, stared at Crook (what's this cad doing in my field?) and dropped into the chair other people had only glanced at respectfully. Maids began to hurry in with trolleys. They placed individual trays on each small table. One of them paused and looked speculatively at Crook in a way that made him wonder if he'd forgotten to fasten any of his essential buttons. Hurriedly he snatched up a newspaper.

A simpering girl, thinking he was trying to avoid her, stopped by his chair.

"Did you want tea?" she asked.

"If that's the rule of the house," agreed Crook, thrusting his great red face round the human column of the paper.

She gaped. "Just tea?"

"The works. And don't forget to tell the cook to put some tea in the pot. All this watered-down stuff ladies swill don't suit me. I like to be able to swim a hen in my cup."

She threw a supercilious glance about her, that Crook interpreted easily enough. There wasn't a table free. But if she thought this would deter Arthur Crook she had a shock coming.

"That's O.K.," said he. "I'm having mine with the Duchess." He indicated the monster in blue velvet.

The maid stared, everybody looked up; Crook was about as unnoticeable as a helicopter buzzing over your front garden. A delicious shiver ran through the company. Old sins have long shadows, and Heaven knows the old girl put on enough airs for an English summer. Well—let her laugh this one off.

The old girl threw up her head; when you saw her eyes you realized there was no need for a fire anywhere in her neighborhood.

"I'm afraid that's not a very comfortable chair you have," she apologized, in a voice that could be heard in Piccadilly Circus. "There's not as much consideration for visitors here as I should like to see."

"Oh, I'm like the snail, he carries his house around and I carry my cushion," returned Crook, in a voice matching hers. He dragged the chair closer.

"You did say tea? There's a ridiculous rule in this hotel about the bar remaining closed until six. Such nonsense. But then we live in a nonsensical age. Didn't you hear, Olga? Another tray of tea for this gentleman."

"Attagirl," thought Crook. "I believe if I told her I'd just escaped from jail, she wouldn't turn one of those cornflower blue hairs." "Very kind," he said heartily, coming closer still. "I knew at once it was you I needed."

"What's it all about?" asked the lady, whose name by a delightful coincidence actually was Bull.

"We—ell." Crook looked at her consideringly. "Don't quote me to the boys in blue, but my guess 'ud be murder." They got on like a house on

fire after that. "The fact is," Crook confided, "I've got to trace a lady who stayed here for a few days prior to getting spliced. Her name . . ."

"Don't tell me. I knew it." The sun in all his splendor had nothing on the Bull. "The moment I heard she was getting married I knew we shouldn't have long to wait. How was it? Drowned in her bath? Looking at the sunset from the landing window and leaned out too far? Or just the commonplace car accident, on the one afternoon her husband wasn't with her." She sounded like someone listening to the seventh symphony.

"You're my girl," cried Crook, delighted. "But no, I don't think she's the one who's under the daisies."

"You mean—the undertaker?"

"The undertaker?"

"The prospective Mr. Fowler. I never heard his real name. He came to call for her once. It reminded me of my school days. And Death was the bride of the high-born ladye. Not that I think she was specially high-born, but we mustn't be snobbish and look down on people."

"I couldn't look down far," acknowledged Crook frankly, "not unless it was into a grave."

"And that's what you fear it may be?"

"Got it first try. Didn't chance to mention where she was goin' for the honeymoon, I suppose?"

"There was no chance about it, but I made it my duty to find out. Not that I'm curious but I don't like bad manners. Seeing she knew no one here and was clearly out of her element, I made a point of talking to her. There was something so strange—you remember that woman in *Our Mutual Friend*—something'll come of this, let's hope it won't be human gore—well, that's what I thought when I saw him. For all she'd never be Queen of the May, she had something, with that little dark, pointed face, like a sable fox, and the sense of something bubbling and choking. Have you ever seen the hot mud springs in California? Well, I have, and I had nightmares for a week afterwards, but I've hardly thought of them in twenty years till I saw that Fowler creature."

"The honeymoon," insinuated Crook, bringing her back from her reminiscences to the point at issue.

"Oh yes. 'Nice to see Paris again,' I said. 'Almost worth getting married.' Believe it or not, she was quite huffy—miffed they called it when I was a girl. It turned out he wasn't taking her to Paris—too much trouble about coffins or something there, I dare say, all this international hysteria. No, they were going to a nice, quiet little place in Dumpshire. Smugglers Bay it's called, because of a smuggler being buried in the churchyard, shot down by the coastguards men with no more compunction, I dare say, than if he'd been a seagull; and another great stone to a party of women and children who sank just off the coast. An unlucky place for a honeymoon, I'd have said. Not that it's not sweetly pretty when the sun shines, and you

see all the yachtsmen out with their boats. 'Is your husband a great sailing man?' I asked her, and she gave me the strangest look. I did wonder if it was worth ordering one of the local papers, to see if there was a headline."

"Honeymoon tragedy," guessed Crook.

"If ever a man wore a label, This Way to the Gallows Tree, that was the one. I tell you, Mr. . . ."

"Crook's the name, Arthur Crook."

"Mr. Crook, I got a whiff of something—brimstone, I shouldn't wonder—as that creature went by."

"I knew it was my lucky day," exulted Crook, just as if every day wasn't his lucky day. "Nothing else springs to your mind that might be a help?"

The Bull considered.

"I'll tell you one thing—she was as mad as a March Hare about him, couldn't bear him even to look at anyone else."

"A jealous type?" amplified Crook, intelligently.

"Aren't I telling you? Though who'd want to steal him, now meat's off the ration, beats me." She chuckled. "Just my joke. I know beauty's only skin deep and p'raps he had a heart of gold under his undertaker's shirt, but if it was me I'd sooner not be going to a quiet little place, all coast and sea, with someone who looks like the public executioner." She leaned forward. "You don't mean anything's happened already?"

"Well, not what you think," Crook assured her. "Besides, you need a motive. . . ."

"That's easy these days when husbands inherit if their wives die without making a will. It was different when I was a gel. You remember that man, Smith, that drowned all his wives in a bath—not the same bath, of course. . . . I remember that case, the middle of the first world war it was, when the news was always bad, and say what you like it made a lovely change, sort of cheered you up. Mind you, I always thought those women asked for it. Fancy making a will as soon as you were married just because your husband does the same, without even finding out if he has anything to leave? Talk about putting temptation in the way of the weak ..."

She poured out the next cup of tea; this was the best afternoon she'd had since Father died, as they say.

"You'll let me know what happens," she pleaded, when Crook rose to go.

"Watch the papers. I shan't disappoint you. Where there's Crook, there's crime. No, I can't wait till the bar opens; next time I'll call a bit later."

And back he went to Bloomsbury.

It was too late to do anything more that evening. First thing next day, before most of the world was stirring, he and The Scourge would be on their way. He had polished off his affairs at the office and was back in Brandon Street when his front doorbell rang, and out he came, fresh as a

daisy, ready to encounter anyone on the stairs, even Death. You never know. But it was Charles Lamb who came up, looking almost as pale as Death would have. He was pretty well shot, and no wonder. It had been quite a day.

“Come in,” offered Crook, bustling about and being the hearty host. “It marches?” he added, setting out the bottles, apparently under the impression that he was the British Hercule Poirot.

“About as fast as a cripple. Oh, I saw the little girl. The school tipped me off about her. Well, of course, she’d be going to school and if they knew her, they’d know where she came from. It’s a village school, all the kids go there till they make the grade for prep school and they were pleasant enough. If Margaret had thought of inquiring there first ...”

“Praise the pigs, they don’t think of everything,” said Crook piously. “If they did we’d spend our lives on our ears in the gutter. Match point to you, though.”

“They said she’d been away for the last few days, a cold or something. She wasn’t very strong. Which is all my eye, Crook. She was strong enough when they were living at Mortcomb. Well, I went on to The Grey House and Mrs. Derry was out. I introduced myself as knowing Mr. Poulden, being his medical adviser, in fact, and asking for news of the little girl.”

“That must have put the plumber’s mate in a tizzy.”

“Oh, Poulden’s the Open Sesame there. The woman said at once that Patsy was all right, just staying home from school for a few days—Mrs. Derry ’ud be in soon, if I liked to wait. . . . Well, I said how about me seeing the little girl, and bawled for her. She heard me first time and down she came. Honestly, Crook, I was shocked. You never saw such a change. Such a high-spirited little thing she always was, and that night in particular like a little lion. ‘Save Margaret, save Margaret.’ And now washed out and dragging around . . . She brightened up, though, when she saw who it was. ‘Where’s Margaret? Why didn’t they let me see her?’ ‘Oh well,’ I said, ‘I hope you will be seeing her soon. Just keep your chin up’; the usual round. Then Mrs. Derry came back, driving a station wagon—market day, see—and I explained all over again. She packed the kid off and asked me in. ‘Mr. Poulden didn’t mention you’d be coming,’ she said. ‘He doesn’t know,’ I told her. “Margaret anywhere around?” She stared. ‘Margaret? You mean, Miss Reeve? Of course not. She went back to London.’ ‘Not she,’ I told her. ‘She’s left Calcutt Street and her luggage has been collected. The impression is she came down here.’ ”

“But she hadn’t?”

“No. I don’t think so. I said, ‘If you didn’t telephone, you should be careful about people using your name.’ She’s got the wind up, Crook. Mrs. Derry, I mean. You were right, there’s been trouble in the past, with the police, I’d guess.”

“What other sort of trouble is there?” asked Crook simply. “For a

woman in her shoes? Nary a hint of the facts, I suppose?"

"I didn't push it. Let Bill earn his bread and gravy. But when I said she mustn't be surprised to find her picture in the paper I thought she was going to pass out. She said, 'Oh no—not again'—something like that. Then she covered up and asked who I thought could have called Miss Reeve. I said, 'Well, not a friend, obviously.' And explained about the luggage being called for next day."

"What did Madam have to say to that?"

"She said it was a trick."

"We could have told her as much."

"It foxed Margaret all right, because she actually did catch the 6:58. She was seen to arrive at Finchford—a porter at the station remembers a girl in a white plastic mac saying something about a car. He remembers a car pulling up and the girl getting into it."

"A car? Not a station wagon?"

"He said a car. You don't miss much, Crook, do you? All the same, we haven't yet found the missing link. Because she never arrived at The Grey House."

Crook stared. "We never thought she would. The fact is, Charles, and surely you've got there by this time, no one's come forward to say he set eyes on her since she left Calcutt Street."

"There was the porter at Finchford," corrected Charles, quickly.

Crook wagged his head. "It's like I told you. Witnesses recognize people by their clothes. What that porter saw was a dame in a white mac waiting for a car. It don't follow that it was Miss Reeve wearing the mac. Are you with me now?"

"You mean, it was Mrs. Poulden inside it."

"With the hood pulled nicely over her head, I wouldn't wonder. Your girl had left the train with Mr. P., wearing Mrs. P.'s coat, I shouldn't wonder. That was to cover their tracks in case questions should be asked. By the way, you don't know the Pouldens' address, I take it?"

"Mrs. Derry hasn't got it herself. She writes to him in care of his bank at Mortcomb. You know what that means."

Crook nodded. He knew. You'd get the Russians giving Churchill the V-sign before you got anything out of a bank manager, unless you were in police uniform, and even then it mightn't be all jam.

"And I suppose the Pouldens got Miss Reeve's address through Mrs. Derry? She fired the signal light after the first meeting."

"That's right. Thought it her duty."

Crook snorted. "Bread and butter 'ud be nearer the truth. Well, I'll get on the trail first thing in the morning."

Charles took a deep breath. "What are the chances of our not being too late?"

"Not knowing all the facts, can't say. They've sent for her baggage, so

maybe they mean to give her a little holiday for a while; it could be there's something they want to find out, and if so, the longer she can hold 'em off, the longer she'll keep the pretty angels waiting, and they'll wait till their wings fall off if I can do anything about it," he added with a cold ferocity that made Dr. Lamb jump.

Dr. Lamb looked unseeingly round the hideous room Crook wouldn't have exchanged for an antechamber of Paradise.

"I'm coming with you," he said.

Crook shook his head. "Putting all your eggs in one basket's always bad economy. Besides, your young woman's right. Accidents can happen to anyone, even me. Why, you'd be playing right into their hands if you came, too. If something breaks this end, I want you on the spot to pick it up. Bill's no good, he's never set eyes on the girl, and Maudie Sheppard's contracted out. I'll keep in touch."

"What's wrong with the police?" demanded Charles.

"I haven't the time to go into that," Crook retorted. "My dear chap, you haven't got a case. A girl gets a telephone call and disappears. She says she's going to see someone who's ill. Every girl who disappears says she's going to see someone who's ill. Besides, if this precious couple know the police are on the job they'll realize the game's up, and whoever falls alive into the hands of the authorities it won't be Margaret Reeve. Here, finish that bottle, and get home. I'm going to be up at dawn and I'm not as young as I was. Don't forget to let Bill know where you're to be found in case he wants a hand."

So, when they'd finished their beer, Charles took his leave and spent the night driving his neighbor below mad by walking up and down the floor in a frenzy. Crook shoved the two glasses in the sink and picked up the evening paper Charles had left on a chair. There was a headline—train crash at Humberstone—four killed.

It didn't mean a thing to him—then. Dropping the paper in the basket he fell into bed and slept like a log (in spite of what the scientists have to say on this point) from the instant his head touched the pillow.

Smugglers Bay was a beauty spot for ten months of the year and pandemonium for the remaining two, when it was invaded by char-a-bancs, and autos and parties of hikers, who covered the shallow beach with litter and mucked up the sailing boats of those residents who hadn't the sense to put them underground or anyway under lock and key. In the spring, however, it was very quiet, a long stretch of sea line with the tall church like a sentry keeping watch among the overgrown graves. The two main hotels were still closed, but there were some smaller apartment houses and boarding establishments advertising hopefully—Vacancies—and Crook went patiently from one to the next until he found a landlady who remembered the Pouldens.

“Thank goodness,” said Crook, beaming like a friendly alligator. He shot a card out of his pocket. “Lawyer,” he explained. “Come from London. About a legacy. Was beginning to lose hope.” (It wasn’t true, of course, but she wasn’t to know that.) “Seems to have pulled up his stumps now he’s married again. Wonder if they left an address with you.”

The card did it. But for that she’d have been cagey. But lawyers are a sort of branch of the police, so she believed, and she remembered having a letter from Mrs. Poulden about some cufflinks Mr. Poulden thought he’d left behind. She had the letters but she hadn’t found the links. The address was Runnymede Road, Leysmith. So he got back into the car and went on from there.

fourteen

To the Pouldens that day had seemed as long as eternity. Both woke very early, aware that it was twelve hours before they could put their plan into action. It was a risk anyway, and every hour increased the risk. Fortunately they'd kept themselves very much to themselves since their arrival. No one was likely to call. But twelve hours can be as long as a lifetime. The weather had changed, the sun was up, shining on the newly dried streets and the bursting branches of the trees that lined the roadway. People came hurrying out of the houses eager for the sun, like ants through the cracks in paving stones. The place bustled with life. At 11 o'clock Mr. Poulden kept his appointment with Mr. Drover. Mr. Drover was elderly and loquacious and impertinent in his curiosity. He insisted on talking about his grandchildren, asked Mr. Poulden if he'd been blessed. No, of course not, newly married, God bless his soul. Well, all a joy to look forward to. Life was full of perils but there were compensations—compensations. How did they like the house where they were living? Well, it would be different, of course, when they got into their own. Would he and Mrs. Drover have the pleasure of seeing Mr. and Mrs. Poulden at the political association meeting that afternoon? A great drive was being made, a great drive. Mr. Poulden unscrewed his fountain pen in a meaning way. If this was a sample of the old chap's abilities, it wasn't surprising the business was going cheaper than he'd anticipated in such a thriving place. "I believe I caught sight of Mrs. Poulden in the car yesterday," droveled the old man. "I hope she didn't think me unmannerly not coming over to speak. But really the rain—all one wanted was to get back."

Edwin said he quite understood.

"As soon as we're settled perhaps you'll bring Mrs. Drover to see us," he added, with his icy smile. It was a safe offer. The Drovers were leaving the neighborhood, going to live in Scotland near a married daughter. He glanced surreptitiously at his watch. Just past twelve. Six more hours to zero hour. And sixty minutes to each hour, and each minute as long as an hour.

He got away at last, and then they were faced with the torture of the endless afternoon. The telephone rang several times, mostly wrong numbers. Beryl's nerves were standing the strain better than his. After the second time, she answered the telephone; she could put on a better act than he. Oh, this was different from dropping a little powdered death into an unsuspecting woman's broth or slipping a cat into another unconscious old woman's room. A hundred possibilities flashed through his mind. Suppose the car broke down, they punctured, someone thumbed a lift and, when they swept by, made a note of the number? Or a neighbor came out of the house just as they were leaving and held them up again? It was a

relief to get down to the garage and go over the motor. He checked every detail. Oil, gas, brakes in good order, lights working, battery, engine . . . everything O.K. She wouldn't let them down. Then—what if someone else were on that lonely coast road tonight?

He stared bitterly at the clear afternoon. What he wanted was rain, black pouring rain, that kept people indoors or sent them out to pack pubs and cinemas. Six o'clock, 6:30 even, wouldn't be dark, not dark enough. But 7:30, by which time the light should properly have failed, would be too risky. They had nearly an hour's journey to the place they had in mind; they didn't want the body washed up on their doorstep.

In his mind he went over and over each step of their procedure. The road to Dead Man's Cave led nowhere else; in the summer it was crowded with cars, lovers looking for a place to neck, and young people on bicycles and crowds in char-a-bancs chancing their lives on the rocks there. Dead Man's Cave was simply a hole in the rock that you reached down a precipitous path. There was an enormous danger sign with a skull and crossbones at the top of the path. If you got caught there, you could say your prayers for the last time. No hope of diving in and swimming round the headland. The rocks below were like teeth, witches' teeth, jagged and black. The tide there came in with immense speed, rushing over the sands, pounding around the rocks, dashing against the cliff face. If you retreated a little into the cave it didn't help you; you soon found yourself facing a mere crack in the great side of the cliff that only a snake could angle through; and if you tried to fight your way out you'd get swept off the cliff face as a swirling cloth sweeps a fly off a windowpane.

It was going to be tricky getting the girl down that path. If the rain had continued there would be no pleasure boats out, and nobody could watch that cliff through a telescope because there was nowhere to watch from. And say what you like, it was a quick ending. Half a dozen of those tumultuous waves would knock you silly; a little later you'd be swept out onto the beach among the rocks, and by the time the furious water receded it was long odds against your own mother knowing you.

When the body was washed up—and sometimes bodies had disappeared without trace—who was going to identify it? A young girl wearing new clothes, obviously a holidaymaker exploring the caves. She might not have been staying at Leysmith merely, have come in on a coach or the bus, gone down to the caves, got cut off—there were no relations, nothing to show that Margaret Reeve, once of London, had ever come west. Even if she were missed and people were looking for her, they wouldn't look here. Girls of her age disappeared every day, and she'd always been a queer secretive type. . . .

He heard a sound and spun about. Beryl stood in the doorway. He drew a gasping breath. "What is it?"

"I wanted to be sure you were all right. It's nearly time."

He almost sobbed with relief. He had thought this dreadful day would never end.

"How is she?" His mouth was so dry the lips would scarcely form the words.

"She was getting restless. I put in the gag and tied her down. There was no hope for it. I couldn't chance her crashing on the windowpane or being heard."

He nodded, looking rather sick. "She realizes, doesn't she?"

"Don't think like that. Why did she have to interfere? She's a danger, like a cancer cell. Have you got the needle prepared?"

"I'll get it now. I called in at the new shop on my way back. Drover carries a good stock. . . ."

He followed her up into the hall.

In the little room at the back of the house Margaret writhed impotently on the bed. Now that sixth sense that functions in the hour of danger warned her that the end was very near. She didn't know precisely what shape it would take—not poison, surely, there'd been too many lost opportunities for that. Some accident, of course, like Miss Bannerman and the cat. A ride in the car and the car overturning? No, not that. They'd have to explain how she came to be in their car. All that afternoon, watching the sun travel around till a bright beam fell on the pale wall, she'd heard the distant hum of the sea. For a time she had thought it might be a boat, an accident, but that would involve them, too. She was tired of thinking. Vaguely she remembered Crook and Charles and Miss Sheppard; they all seemed denizens of another world.

The door opened and Mr. Poulden came in. He had IT in his hand, and she shrank up against the wall, shaking her head vigorously.

"Now, don't be a silly girl. You won't know anything. This is the simple way. Just go to sleep, that's all, a long, dark sleep. There's no more to it than that. You're lucky really, when you think of the things that happen to people, illness and pain. ..."

Over the gag the gentle hazel eyes implored; savagely he dropped his own. Beryl's voice behind him said, "We ought to go now." She came past him and caught Margaret's arm.

At that instant the front doorbell began to ring.

It rang and rang as if someone had put a finger on the bell and meant to keep it there till the day of doom. The Pouldens stared at one another. Who can it be? We don't know anyone. If we take no notice . . . But whoever was on the doorstep wasn't buying that one. On and on and on the bell pealed.

"For pity's sake . . . no, I'll open it, Beryl." He laid the needle on the chair and went down. Sweat was starting on his forehead, his hands were clammy. Through the little window beside the front door he saw the most

extraordinary contraption standing by the gate, low and small and bright scarlet. A stunt, of course. Someone advertising detergents or a new weekly.. He flung the door open and the stout red-headed man in a check overcoat above a suit of bright ginger tweed, and a checked cap drawn over a bumpy forehead, who had his free hand on the knob, nearly fell over on his head.

“What is it?” demanded Edwin. “We don’t buy at the door.”

“You’re lucky then, because I’ve nothing to sell.” He pushed a ham-sized hand into his pocket and flicked out a card. “Crook’s the name, Arthur Crook, and I represent Miss Margaret Reeve. Maybe you can give me a line on where she is.”

Under his eyes Crook watched his companion’s face change. Now it was the color of earth, the eyes dark holes, the jaw naked bone. Corpses look like that perhaps when they rise from their graves in haunted churchyards after dark to frolic till cockcrow sends them scuttling underground again. Corpses, thought Crook, not vampires. Vampires are ruddy with their victims’ blood.

The corpse spoke. “I can’t imagine why you supposed I should be able to help you, Mr.—er—Cook.”

“Crook.” He spelled it distinctly. “Well, method of elimination, you know. Knock out all the impossibles and what remains, however improbable, must be the truth. You’re all she has by way of next-of-kin.”

“Either Miss Reeve has misinformed you or, for a lawyer, that is a remarkably loose statement. Margaret Reeve was a distant connection of my first wife.”

“Was?” murmured Crook, cocking a red eyebrow.

“I use the past tense because—well, under the circumstances, I scarcely expect we shall meet again. I’m not aware if you know the details of her last night under my roof. . . .”

“And how!” murmured Crook. “Well, you do disappoint me. I tried Mrs. Derry, of course, but she couldn’t tell me a thing.”

“I am at a loss to understand why you ever imagined she would. I was at some pains to see that Miss Reeve should not have Patsy Warren’s address. I considered the relationship quite undesirable. . . .”

“You could say that of a lot of relationships, includin’ husbands and wives, but it don’t follow.” He omitted to say what didn’t follow, but he had the impression that his audience understood him. “Poor little beggar!” he thought, meaning Patsy. “Badgered about from pillar to post.”

“I think, Mr. Crook, I am the best judge of the child’s future. I understand she is settling down very nicely, or would be if Margaret Reeve would leave her alone.”

“You’ve a hope,” said Crook. “Well, maybe you can make some suggestion. What other buddies had the girl got?”

“I really know nothing about her. In fact, I’m at a loss to understand

how you knew my address.”

“Deerfoot on the trail,” said Crook in his ebullient way. “Tracked you from South Kensington via Smugglers Bay. The present Mrs. Poulden on view?”

Before Edwin could reply—and at these last words a curious mottled color showed in the corpse-like cheeks—two lads stopped to look at The Scourge, their eyes bulging out of their heads.

“Bet?” suggested one.

“Stunt?” said the other.

Crook turned his big red head. “Eyes look your last,” he bawled. “You’ll never see her like again, and one of these days, when you’re gibbering on either side of the central heating in your Eventide Home, you’ll be able to say to each other, ‘Well, we may have made a proper muck-up of things, but at least when we were lads we saw The Scourge.’”

He had, when he chose, a remarkably carrying voice.

Two or three windows were raised, and Bob Brewer, the landlord of The Grapes, came to his door to see what was going on. Mr. Poulden flushed sensitively.

“You’d better come in,” he muttered, reluctantly admitting his visitor to the hall. Crook stormed in like an army triumphant with banners. He lifted his big pug nose as if he could smell trouble. Beryl appeared at the head of the staircase.

“Edwin!”

“It’s a Mr. Crook, wanting information about Margaret—Margaret Reeve. I’ve been telling him I’m afraid we can’t help.”

“What’s happened to her?”

“That’s just what no one seems to know,” returned Crook, boisterously. He followed his host into the parlor. “Up and lit out at a minute’s notice. We thought, of course, it was young Patsy. But Mrs. D. can’t help us. You know her.” He fixed Edwin with an eye as brilliant and as inexorable as a police light. “If she says the girl ain’t there, is it likely to be true?”

“I can imagine no reason why she should wish to conceal the fact. In fact, she’d probably be only too pleased to broadcast it. Margaret was making a perfect nuisance of herself.”

“All depends which way you look at it,” suggested Crook. “Patsy wouldn’t agree.” His eyes flickered like a dragonfly, moving so fast you couldn’t follow them. If he was right, and he was convinced he was, somewhere in this house, perhaps in this room, would be the clue he sought. He was under no illusions; he knew it was possible that when he found Margaret Reeve (and it never once went through his mind that he wouldn’t) she’d be past human aid, but he meant to find her for all that. Crook always gets his man, and in this case a peculiarly unattractive specimen.

“I’m sorry you’ve had this journey for nothing,” said Poulden in pointed

tones.

"Well, not for nothing," riposted Crook, sunny as the one day of the British Summer. "You've told me she ain't here, and you can't help." He cocked his head. "What was that? Your Abigail getting nosy?"

"I don't know what you mean?"

"Someone moving—or I am getting imaginative?"

"There's no one in the house but ourselves," said Edwin.

"Maybe a cat," Crook suggested.

Beryl shivered. "We haven't such a thing. I—don't care for them."

"Some people don't," Crook agreed. "Miss Bannerman didn't either, did she? By the way, I'm glad you let the little girl keep hers."

"It was most kind of Mrs. Derry. She made an exception in Patsy's case."

"Wonderful what you can persuade people to do."

Beryl jumped up. "I didn't hear anything, but I'll look. Perhaps the wind blew something down. It's been a terrible year."

Crook looked surprised. "'Bout average, ain't it? You start telling people you remember a time when the sun shone in Spring on the English countryside and they'll start countin' on their fingers and wonderin' about reincarnation."

Beryl flung him an acid look and walked out of the room. "I really am bothered about Miss Reeve," said Crook, confidently. "You don't think she can have come to any harm? I mean, she never even let the people she was workin' for know she wasn't comin' back."

"Have you tried the London hospitals? Street accidents are so common. . . ."

"Ah, but that don't fit the bill. She sent for her luggage."

"Sent for her luggage?" Poulden's face might have been carved from wood. "Then, if she left no address, presumably she didn't wish her whereabouts to be known."

"She's a minor, still. As her legal representative, I do feel a mite anxious. Hullo, what's this? Someone mucking about with The Scourge?"

Edwin went to the front door, which was what Crook had intended. Now for a few seconds he had the room to himself. Lady kept the place a treat, he reflected, no dust, no books lying about open on chairs, no papers. ... Not that it impressed him. You can't have anything neater than a coffin and who yearns for that? He peered behind ornaments, cushions, in open china dishes, the wastepaper basket, the drawers of the writing table. A step in the hall sent him back to his chair.

"No harm done," said Mr. Poulden, "but—I question your wisdom in leaving such a remarkable vehicle on public show."

"It's getting dark," said Crook, heartily. "In the dark all cats are gray." Talk about pussies, he thought. This chap was like a cat on hot bricks, the mere mention of the species gave him pins and needles. All the same, there didn't seem much sense staying any longer. "If I'd had any gumption I'd

have said I came from an agent and asked if I could look the place over, seeing Poulden's moving out to his own premises any day now, but I suppose he'd have said it wasn't convenient at this hour," he told himself remorsefully.

He went out to The Scourge, voluble in apologies for having disturbed them, and drove a few yards to The Grapes. He felt as if he'd been visiting a mortuary; a good reviver was what he wanted, and when he'd downed that he'd treat himself to another. He got into easy conversation with Bob Brewer. The mention of Edwin Poulden's name brought no sympathetic flash to the fellow's eye.

"No use to us," he said. "Water, water everywhere with him."

"Ungrateful," Crook agreed, saying, "Same again and have this one with me. Seeing you must be a lot of help to him, pick-me-ups and liver pills, all the bundle, in short. Family man?" he added casually.

"I told you, he doesn't come here. We shall get our stuff from Ponting," he added.

The bar began to fill up. Crook wasn't surprised; it was cheerful and clean and the beer was good. Moreover, Bob gave the impression that he knew he was there to serve you. Crook picked up his glass and moved over to a small table fronting the road. He watched the chaps coming in. Regulars, on the whole, he thought. In the parlor window of the Poulden house the light still burned; the window was ajar and the faint sounds of a radio floated through the air. This was zero hour and activity was abroad.

Poulden was mousing his way out of the garage; Mrs. Poulden sat beside him. There was something—a bundle of rugs it looked like—in the back seat. Someone asked Bob if he could use the telephone and was told he could. More people swung in and out. A newcomer asked humorously, "Seen the super-jaguar at the gate?" and when Crook came out he found a couple of chaps looking critically at The Scourge.

"Wonder if she goes?" they said.

"You'll see," Crook assured them.

The new car Beryl had bought for a wedding present for her husband came silently up the ramp and turned west. The sea lay that way and the black cliffs and the caves that were covered long before high tide.

Edwin's face was tense; so was Beryl's. The bundle of rugs had no expression at all. If it had any features they were hidden now. Edwin shifted into second, into third, and they were on their way. From his station in a patch of shadow by the corner Crook watched them go.

It was Beryl who realized that the light behind them from some other vehicle traveling at approximately the same speed as themselves was keeping remarkably close on their trail.

"What's he doing at this hour of the night on this road?" she asked uneasily.

Edwin said, trying to sound jocular, though Heaven knows his own heart was going at a painful rate, "Heading for the cliffs, I dare say."

Beryl thrust her hand through the window. "It's begun to rain, at last. Who wants to hang about on the clifftop in weather like this?"

"Perhaps he'll stop presently; there's a turning by St. Peter's Mount, that runs into a cul-de-sac. Drover tells me the place is thick with cars of a summer evening."

They went on at a steady rate; the rain increased in ratio. It slowed them up and it was going to make things difficult when they got to their destination, but of course it did keep the roads pretty clear. Neither of them could have endured the thought of another night like the last; even Beryl would have been reduced to asking her husband for a sedative. As for the bundle in the back, it didn't matter to her any more whether it rained or no.

At St. Peter's Mount the following car turned aside. Edwin heaved a groan of relief; he bent above the wheel and they shot forward. The idea of changing his plans never passed through his mind, but this was one of the few occasions of his life when he wished he was a drinking man and could soak himself into unconsciousness as soon as the horrible task was done. They drove for some while in silence; the rain thickened, then suddenly stopped.

Out of the silence Beryl said, "He's there again."

"Who?" But of course he knew the answer.

"That car."

"Who can it be?"

"It's that man, I'm sure of it. Crook, didn't you say? Edwin, he suspects something. What can we do now? It's a direct road to the cliffs, no other turns."

They curved to the right, reaching a spot where some optimists had had a picnic; the bits of sodden wrappings lay about, with some empty cigarette cartons and a broken bottle. Edwin stopped the car abruptly; the bundle in the back jolted forward to fall against the driver's seat. Edwin got out, found a jagged piece of glass, put it carefully in the road.

"That'll fix him," he said grimly, driving on.

Crook, keeping the lights ahead just within his purview, felt the wheel of The Scourge jolt on some obstruction, and a minute later knew he'd got a puncture. Even a madman wouldn't risk a drive of unknown length in such circumstances. He calculated they must have covered nearly twenty miles. Probably not much farther to go. It wouldn't help Margaret or young Dr. Lamb if he turned the car over and landed on his head. He drew up, got out and, with remarkable celerity for a man with his figure, changed the tire. When he got back into the driver's seat, there was naturally no sign of the big gray car. He drove The Scourge like a tyrant, having no illusions as to how the jagged piece of glass came upon the road,

and presently, when he began to fear he might be too late, after all, he saw his quarry disappearing over a low hill in the distance. Now he was certain they must be close to their journey's end. The road he was on swerved to the right, avoiding a sandy stony stretch that would be death to any reasonable car.

"Only we ain't reasonable, there's times when you can't afford it, not even when you're a millionaire," remarked Crook grimly, and he drove the gallant little Scourge into the sandy waste. It was all even he could do to coax her to stay upright; she bucketed, she bogged, she panted, but he brought her from one hazard to the next as a skillful and sympathetic rider persuades his horse to achieve the impossible. His main fear was there might be flints on the road, and a second puncture meant defeat. The gray car was now a long way off to the right but not so far ahead as it had been. "Praise the pigs," murmured Crook piously, "they played for safety when they made that inland road. Played for the commercial interest, too, probably." There'd be any number of Last Cafes and Sunlight Parlors and Coca-Cola bars and Cups of Tea and Cigarettes between here and the cliff edge. Quite a reasonable garage service, too, he shouldn't wonder, at unreasonable prices. When it seemed that The Scourge could go no farther, the sandy stretch came to an abrupt end and he was back on a narrow lane, rutted and stony, but a treat after what he'd just endured. Now the sound of the sea had risen to a shout, the spray came flying up in fountains, the face of the cliffs was black in the night gloom. One human creature would look no bigger than a gull in that expanse, and, given the wretched weather to which the British public was becoming resigned, it could be twenty-four hours at least before anyone found a body there. And if the tides were on Edwin Poulden's side, the girl mightn't be found for three days or more. He didn't know the countryside at all, but his eyes were more prominent and his ears larger than those of most men, and during his few hours in the neighborhood he had already formed a pretty accurate idea of the plan in Edwin's mind. When he came to the clifftop and saw the notice DANGER and the skull and crossbones, he stopped. "This'll be the place," he reflected. Around him spread the enormous night, though it couldn't be much after eight o'clock; the tide was coming in fast. Even to a townsman it was obvious that there could not be much time to lose. And thinking this, he saw the lights of the other car coming over the hill. He strained his eyes; in all the rest of his world there was no other human sight or sound. He looked at The Scourge, touched the gay red hood with a big hand that shook a bit.

"No go, old girl," he said. "This time we're for it."

Deliberately he drove the car across the road the Pouldens and their victim were bound to take.

As Edwin drew near their destination, feeling as if he'd been driving

through some antechamber of hell for an eternity, he saw the red car and involuntarily he slowed.

“What’s that?” exclaimed Beryl’s voice at his side.

“He’s beaten us to it, after all.” The road was too narrow here for him to turn easily; the driver of the other car would have plenty of time to come up and see as much as he needed, and, though Edwin’s record was a pretty black one, the murder of a man he’d never seen till tonight hadn’t been part of his plan. Besides, though Margaret Reeve was just one girl in a million, whom (so far as he knew) no one was going to miss (discounting Patsy, as, of course, he did) no man who owned such a car (giving it the benefit of the doubt) could stay unnoticed. . . . Already there’d been half a dozen people around his own door at Leysmith prepared to identify it, and no doubt there would be others. And if he really was a lawyer from London he’d have clients, if not friends. Still, there wasn’t any choice now. Edwin turned on his big headlights, that would blind any driver in a smaller vehicle. He saw the bright scarlet body and saw, too, the huge checked overcoat, the motoring cap, in check of a different shade, crouched above the wheel. The car was broadside on, and if looks were anything to go by would buckle up at the first serious onslaught. His hand crept to the gear lever, his foot was on the accelerator.

“Edwin! You can’t!”

“He’s asked for it,” retorted Poulden, desperately. Quick, Beryl, get out. Yes, do as I say. This is Hobson’s choice.”

It wasn’t such a risk really. A little bus like The Scourge had no chance, and if Crook had thought Edwin would hold his hand now and pass in his checks, he was wrong. But, actually, he hadn’t thought anything of the kind.

After the impact, that flattened The Scourge into a lump of metal—and even the junk dealers wouldn’t offer you more than her weight in scrap any longer—Edwin jerked open his own door and got out. Beryl was at his side in an instant. It hadn’t done the car any good, but he believed she could still run. His fertile brain was wondering if he could turn this into good account. With Crook out of the way and Margaret with him, wherever they both might be, it might be made to appear that she’d been traveling with the dead man. It mightn’t sound too good a story—he’d be the first to admit that—but he’d have no witnesses to testify against him.

He said as much to Beryl.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” said Crook, rising from the heap of boulders behind which he’d concealed himself when he laid his trap. “You don’t kill Arthur Crook so easy, though you’ve murdered The Scourge right enough.”

Edwin was (to use one of those cliches Crook himself was inclined to affect) frozen to his tracks. The dark swam before his eyes, actually blotting out the squat figure that looked as triumphant as Toad of Toad

Hall, though, in fact, there was little enough triumph in Crook's heart, surveying the ruin at his feet.

"Clothes don't always make the man," the odious voice continued. "And I wouldn't be the first to think of making a dummy with a coat and a rug."

He still stayed where he was, on the other side of the wreckage, straining his ears like a dying saint hoping to hear the trumpets of angels.

"I suppose you're mad," said Edwin at last. "Did you want to commit suicide?"

"Not me. Damn it, I'm a lawyer, and suicide's out of bounds."

Some of his friends, Bill Parsons among them, would have had the ague to hear him. As if Crook cared a trouser button for the law, if it got in his way; no more, in fact, than Edwin Poulden had cared for The Scourge.

Beryl spoke. "What do you expect us to do now? Offer you a lift?" The avenging furies weren't in it with her.

"I wouldn't dare," said Crook, piously. "Not with all my sins upon me. But I'm open to any reasonable offer. By the way, had it occurred to you to see how the young lady's taken all this?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Edwin glanced around him. They were near enough the edge of the cliff to make it seem likely that the driver of The Scourge had crashed and himself gone over, though the murderer might have his work cut out explaining about the cap and the coat still in the car. All the same, it was their one chance. Luckily on such a night they weren't likely to be interrupted.

"You're a fool," he said, bitterly. "Did you think you could stand against the pair of us?"

He took a step forward. He was a head and a half taller than the Criminals' Hope, as Crook was familiarly known, and his hands were butcher's hands, the fingers curling in anticipation.

"One step nearer," said Crook, rolling his eyes in a final beseeching of impenetrable heaven, "and you'll be out in the dark, too. I'm armed." He waved a spanner. "And don't think I shan't use it. I shouldn't hesitate."

Beryl jumped forward, catching at his shoulder; at the same instant Poulden attacked from the other side. Crook stuck out a thick leg and the druggist came crashing on the stony road. Crook had the woman's arm in an iron grip. But even so the odds were against him; what he had to play for now was time. Edwin, recovering himself, caught Crook around the ankles, tugging him off his feet; Beryl sank her teeth in her oppressor's wrist, her free hand clawed at his face. The bundle in the car took no interest in the proceedings.

So occupied with their struggle were the three on the cliff edge—another minute and he'd be over and let him see how much his glib conceit could do for him among those sharp rocks and furious tides, thought Edwin—that the big, dark car pelting down the road was seen by neither miscreant until the sound of grinding gears and crashing brakes

caused them for the instant to loosen their hold. Crook tore himself free as the policemen poured out of the car.

"You've taken your time," he said. "Things are coming to a nice pass when even the police force works to rule."

He hadn't any idea what a bizarre appearance he presented, blood on his face from Beryl's nails, blood on his hand from Beryl's teeth, his clothes torn, his hair blown up into a peak by the wind and soaked by the rain. The missing link, the human gorilla . . .

A voice said curtly they'd come as soon as they could after getting his message from The Grapes.

A man not in uniform had yanked open the door of the big gray car and hauled a rug off the thing on the back seat. .

"Glad to see one of you remembers the living," said Crook. "How's she coming?" There was a brief pause.

"She's alive," said the doctor. "Drugged, of course. We must get her back right away. Will this car run?"

One of the policemen began to experiment. "She'll do."

"More than The Scourge ever will," Crook agreed.

Another member of the force looked at the wreckage. "Was that a car?" he asked and you could hear the chuckle in his voice.

"One more crack like that out of you and they'll be saying, 'Was that a cop? You ought to put that in the Chamber of Horrors.' "

A kind of shock went through the company; the voice was as intimidating as an air raid siren. Then the second police car arrived, and the four travelers were distributed between the pair.

Edwin said, "I shall want some explanation of this," but his voice carried little conviction.

Crook said, "Brought the handcuffs? Well, keep your eyes open. You will look silly if you get back to headquarters with a pair of corpses on your hands, and I don't mean the girl or me."

Only the doctor paid no attention to these exchanges. He knew his job, which was Margaret Reeve. For all he cared the rest of them could jump over the cliff, police included.

They created quite a furor, despite the bad weather and the comparative emptiness of the streets, as they came driving back into Leysmith. The three civilians had been cautioned not to talk till they reached their destination and they all took the hint—even Crook.

The doctor went off to the hospital with the girl, and rang up some hours later to say that physically she'd pull through, but he wouldn't answer for her mental condition. At the moment she was suffering from shock.

"Poor kid!" said Crook, but he couldn't help remembering his regiment of weird old girls, who'd found themselves in similar situations—Laura Verity, Frances Pinnegar, Emmy Crisp—and had come bouncing out as

bright as buttons. Still, the young hadn't got the same stamina, hadn't had so long to develop it, and anyway the old gang hadn't grown up in the Welfare State. Tooth and nail, and what you can't save for yourself, you lose, that had been their experience in youth.

In the small hours of the morning Dr. Lamb arrived, having driven down from London with a recklessness only second to Crook's own.

"Sorry I was out when you rang from the pub," he told Crook. "I came like a bat out of hell."

"I couldn't have put it better myself," Crook approved. "All right, cool down, have some beer, it's the real McCoy. And then maybe Dr. Priestman will let you go around to the hospital, seeing you belong to the same trade union. I never sat for any medical exams myself, but I should think the sight of you at the bedside 'ud do that girl more good than anything you'll find in the British Pharmacopoeia."

At the hospital Dr. Priestman, who had just left the sickroom, said Charles could wait if he liked, but Margaret hadn't come around yet.

"And when she does I dare say she'll be as sick as a cat, and she certainly won't want to see you then. In the meantime you might give me the low-down on the case."

"Crook's the chap you want for that," said Dr. Lamb handsomely. "I'm only carrying his clubs. He's the fellow who knows all the answers."

And having passed the doctor on to the man who (he thought) was second only to Churchill in his powers of endurance, he settled down to wait. He'd have haunted the hospital corridors till the day of doom, if need be, but luckily his patience wasn't put to the test.

Next morning, when Margaret came around, she discovered dazedly not only that she was still alive but that she was engaged to be married.

It was the man who knew all the answers who told her, and the Archbishop of Canterbury couldn't have gainsaid him.

"There's a posse of bluebottles around the bed as if there was a corpse there already," Charles had stormed. "No one can get through."

"Watch me," said Crook, confidently.

He had already made his statement to the police. The Pouldens were waiting for the arrival of their solicitor—not that he'd be much good, but it gave them breathing space. Crook, boasting that he had nothing to hide, opened his great paw and showed the authorities three scraps of paper that he'd looted from the house in Runnymede Road the night before.

"It's what I've always said," he told them, wagging his great red head like one of the major prophets. "It's the little things that matter. Nothing could be much smaller than these."

He spread them carefully on the desk—two little price tags with the name of a well-known London store printed on them, and a crumpled bit of paper that was the bill accompanying them.

"One twin set, one blue tweed skirt," he read out. "What was the victim wearin' when you rolled up? Just so. Bought in London yesterday, mark you. Funny, don't you think, sending for the girl's stuff and then goin' to the expense of buyin' her new clothes she was never goin' to enjoy? The idea was that when the body was found, always supposin' the clothes hadn't been washed away, it wasn't to be wearin' anything anyone had seen Margaret Reeve going around in. Mrs. Poulden's goin' to have quite a job explainin' how she came to be shoppin' in London and buyin' tea cakes at Leysmith simultaneously. But that'll be her headache."

"Where did you find these?" inquired authority.

Crook wasn't making himself any more popular in Leysmith, with the police, that is, than he was in London.

"In the wastepaper basket in the Pouldens' flat. Managed to get the place for myself for about thirty seconds. There had to be something to tie up with the girl," he added.

The police stared. "Why?"

Crook stared back. "Because if there wasn't," he explained elaborately, "I wouldn't have any evidence to offer the flatties. Oh, I know she was lying drugged in the back of the car that ran down The Scourge, and don't believe 'em if they tell you that was their little joke and they knew I wasn't inside, but they might have said they were takin' her to get a little air."

"You really suppose we should have believed that?"

"If I was their lawyer I'm darned well tooting you would," retorted Crook. "Oh, it's as plain as the nose on my face. Mr. Poulden left the train at Harne with Miss Reeve, wrapped in his wife's red mac. Mrs. Poulden remained on the train, wearin' Miss Reeve's white one. She had a jumpy minute or so at Finchford, because Poulden had to get the car they'd left

parked at Harne that morning, and drive down and meet the train, and of course cars ain't so fast, but the train had to stop to pick up mails, so the time lag wasn't much, just enough for an official to remember seeing someone in a white mac walkin' along the platform. Which was all accordin' to Hoyle.

"It's pretty late when they get back to Leysmith and by that time the girl's been put to sleep. Next morning up comes Mrs. P. to London to collect the luggage—playin' safe again, you see. If they'd taken a bit more risk and put the young lady's light out right away ... No, don't tell me, the tides weren't co-operative and it's a lot harder committin' murder in broad daylight than it is after dark— your trick, Colonel. Neat getting the girl's clothes, because that 'ud shut the landlady's mouth, and if anyone asked, well, the girl had left. No address. No pack drill. Girls are doin' it all the time. Though, mind you," he added, soberly, "if it hadn't been for the train crash no one could have foreseen, not even me and Bill could have saved the girl."

"Providence," murmured the officer, but Crook didn't smile.

"Tain't for me to say Providence engineers a train accident that kills four people and injures forty more to get my client out of the red, but it's another case of one man's meat . . . Anyway, it gave us the extra twenty-four hours we had to have, and we'd reached the stage where we could do with a bit of help."

"Must have given Mr. Poulden a shock when you turned up," murmured the officer, reflectively.

"I'll say. Mind you, you can't blame him for not anticipatin' that development. It's the thing you don't expect that floors most murderers. Not that you need me to tell you that. No, his mistake was to suppose that nobody cared a row of beans if Margaret Reeve lived or died, nobody except the child, that is, and he didn't count her. He didn't allow for Charles and, naturally, he didn't allow for me. And even if he had I don't see what other way out he could have taken," added Mr. Crook. "He was in too deep. This wasn't his first shot at murder by a long chalk."

The policeman frowned. "Could you prove that statement, Mr. Crook?"

Crook folded his hands comfortably over his paunch.

"I don't have to provide proof, that's *your* pigeon. Only —work it out for yourself. Why try and put out Margaret Reeve's light—and you don't deny that that was his intent —unless she was a danger to him? And how could she be a danger if she was no more than a nursemaid in his household? Ergo, she knew something, and what could that be? We—ell, an old lady had died in rather mysterious circumstances under Mr. P.'s roof. And before that the gentleman's wife had died just as suddenly. The way I see it is that Miss Bannerman knew too much about Mrs. P.'s death (you get her lawyer to show you the letter she sent him that wasn't read at the inquest, and I'll eat my cap if it don't mention wedding bells), and then Miss Reeve

knew a bit too much about Miss Bannerman's death. So—out with Miss Reeve. He planned it all very neatly. No one down in Leysmith was likely to associate him with the girl. They were strangers there, kept themselves to themselves as the saying is, hadn't opened their shop yet so practically no one knew them, and I doubt if anyone in those parts would have recognized Margaret Reeve's name if they heard it. Nobody saw the girl arrive, and Mrs. P. even went to the trouble to buy a new outfit for her to die in. There was nothing to identify her, the place where they planned to put her overboard was nearly thirty miles away, there was no one, he thought, to enquire about her whereabouts, and to top everything, by the time the sea did give up the dead that were in her, her own mother mightn't have recognized her, if she were still alive. The kind of facial the rocks down there give you don't improve anyone's appearance."

To Charles, later, in reply to a question, he said, "Hang? Don't ask me. All depends how he pleads and how much sense his counsel has. Yes, I know they've dug up the body of his ever-loving wife and found arsenic in it, but that don't prove the widower administered it. There was someone else on the premises who could conceivably have wanted Mrs. P. out of the way, and who had the same opportunities as Poulden himself."

"Miss Bannerman?"

"Precisely."

"She could hardly have expected to entice him into matrimony on the strength of a successful murder," Charles demurred.

"Oh, I don't suggest she had a hand in it, I'm sure she hadn't. The point I'm makin' is you can't prove, beyond all shadow of a doubt, that she didn't do it. It could be the double cross, see. She puts out the old lady's light and then tells P. that if he don't come up to scratch she'll go to the police. Well, if you were on a jury and had to choose between the two of them, who'd get your money? Poulden, of course. And both of them knew it. Still, as I say, I don't fancy she was anything but accessory after the fact, and no thanks to Poulden at that."

"It sounds an odd ambition, to want to hitch up with a wife-murderer," Charles demurred.

"Once bitten, twice shy," said Crook. "People mostly get murdered because they ain't expecting it. She'd be on her guard and let him know it. Not that I think this was a case of an elderly lady who'd been neglected in her youth losing her head over another woman's husband. I think all she wanted was security. She'd got herself dug in after years of livin' in her boxes here and there, and as Mrs. P. she could stay under the same roof to the day of her death. I don't reckon she had much to fear from him. Two wives dying in twelve months, say, would make a dumb man talk. It wouldn't surprise me to know she'd got tabs on Beryl Fowler, and meant to stop that little game, because, once Mr. P. brings a new bride to the house, it's out on her ear for the lodger. Still, as I say, the prosecution's got to

prove all that, if they want the judge to put on his little black cap, and whichever way it goes neither of the precious pair will be at liberty to do any more harm for quite a while. So you forget about 'em, and tell that girl of yours to forget about 'em, too. Got any plans yet?"

"As soon as Margaret's fit to stand up in Church and say I will, she's all set to become Mrs. Lamb," returned Charles hardily.

"That's right," Crook approved. "Don't waste any time, and make sure your name's at the head of the list. Know how many proposals she's had already, from chaps who've never set eyes on her? How about the little gal? Don't tell me the future Mrs. Lamb is going to leave her at The Grey House, but you'll hardly want to start your married life with a seven-year-old who don't legally belong to either of you."

"Oh, Patsy's being taken care of," said Charles, in easy tone. "My mother—ever met my mother, Crook? You should. She makes Boadicea look like a sucking-dove. Well, Mamma has a school for young children who've got no parents or guardians to butt in with ideas of their own, and she'll take Patsy. Don't look like that. She'll be O.K. Mamma will see to that. If the Archangel Gabriel came down and made any comments on her way of doing things, he'd soon be flying back with a flea in his ear."

"Widow?" murmured Crook. "H'm." His sympathy was with the late Mr. Lamb. Not surprising, really, he'd preferred that fine and private place, the grave, to living with a woman who could make Boadicea look like a sucking-dove.

He said he couldn't act as best man but he'd come and collect his piece of wedding cake to put under his pillow, so that he could dream of the lady whose life Providence, mercifully, hadn't allowed him to wreck. True to tradition, his arrival at the church attracted even more notice than that of the much-publicized bride. He drove himself in his latest acquisition, an ancient Rolls, high in the body, half the length of most of the streamlined monsters that were turning the roads into horror, but guaranteed to pass most of them at a pinch. Her color was bright yellow.

The bridegroom, who knew he was of less importance, in the public eye, than the bridal bouquet, observed respectfully, "I do hand it you, Crook. A chap 'ud be looking at a violet a long time before he thought of you. Still," he added in consoling tones, "you can always have her resprayed."

"What's wrong with the color?" asked Crook, genuinely astonished.

"Nothing, if you say so. I just thought you might find her a bit conspicuous. That's all."

"The day I let myself be dwarfed by my car, you can ring up the Crematorium Board," offered Crook, generously, "Me, I like a car you can't forget. Not so easy for some absent-minded chap to drive off in it and swear in court he thought it was his." He patted her hood affectionately. "Can't be two like her in the country," he said.

Of course, he acknowledged to himself, she wasn't The Scourge, just as

your new wife isn't the same as the old, and the new dog can't compare with the one you've lost. But a wife's a wife and a dog's a dog, and this was certainly a car in a million. Probably the car wasn't built that, in his estimation, would be the equal to The Scourge, but this one would run her pretty close.

The Old Superb, he said affectionately, patting her again.

After he'd seen the newlyweds depart, he jumped into the driver's seat and tore around to the Two Chairmen.

"Come on, Joe," he said. "Never mind about the clock. There's two minutes to go, and I'll give you a toast." Lifting his glass, he looked into the future as eagerly as the most optimistic of bridegrooms and drank a health to his new partner in crime.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ANTHONY GILBERT is the pseudonym for an English author who writes novels of contemporaneous English life and probably does not wish to confuse the authorship of those books with his murder mysteries. The name Anthony Gilbert has become synonymous with that of Mr. Crook, insouciant criminal lawyer, who has appeared as the *deus ex machina* in these tales of violence.